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by BILL SEVERN

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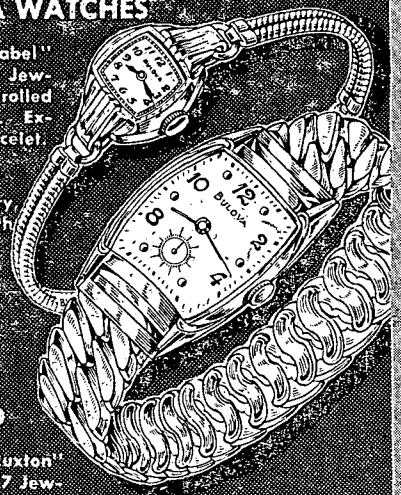

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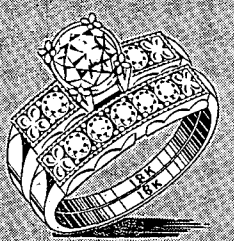

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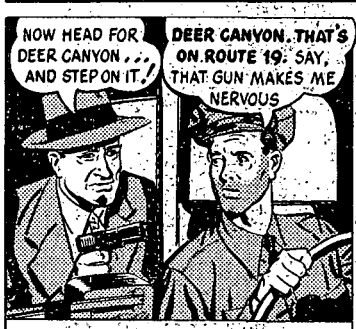
HIS TAXI NEWLY EQUIPPED WITH TWO-WAY RADIO, JOE DOUGLAS IS REPORTING TO HIS GARAGE AT THE END OF A LONG DAY. BEHIND THE WHEEL WHEN HIS REAR VISION MIRROR SHOWS . . .



LEAVING THE OPEN RADIO MIKE ON HIS LAP, JOE REPEATS THE UNSUSPECTING THUG'S INSTRUCTIONS . . .

. . . TO HIS GARAGE, WHERE THE SUPERINTENDENT RELAYS THEM TO THE POLICE

MOTHER'S QUITE UPSET. CAN'T YOU GET OUR STATEMENTS LATER?
I'LL TAKE THEM HOME AND COME DOWN TO HEADQUARTERS
CERTAINLY, MISS BARLOW

TWO HOURS LATER

I GET MY DEGREE FROM NIGHT LAW SCHOOL NEXT MONTH
H-M-M-M, MY FIRM HAS STARTED MANY A YOUNG LAWYER UP THE LADDER . . .
I DIDN'T REALIZE HE'S SO HANDSOME

FOR SLICK, REFRESHING SHAVES AT A SAVING, GET THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE KEENEST AND LONGEST LASTING OF ALL LOW-PRICED BLADES AND FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. AVOID THE IRRITATING EFFECT OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT, NEW 10-BLADE PACKAGE WITH USED-BLADE COMPARTMENT.
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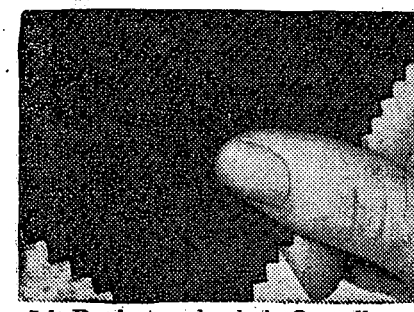

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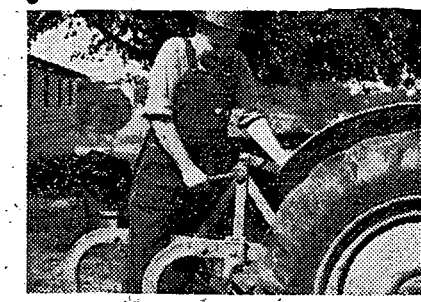

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ALL-STORY LOVE

Volume 120, No. 4 December, 1950

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A husband for Christmas is just about the answer to every girl's prayer.

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An engagement ring for the wrong girl meant tears for the right one.

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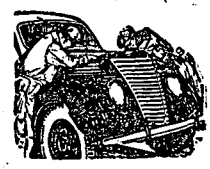

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A-2674 CREOLE

I'm Creole, twenty-five years old, five feet four, have black eyes and brown hair. I love to sew, go to movies and read good books. Am very lonely and want to hear from friends everywhere. Will answer all letters, and tell you about California.

Betty

A-2675 MUSIC LOVER

Here is a man in his late twenties who loves music, hiking and camping. Best of all I would like to hear from a lot of pen pals. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots. Come on, pals, let's start corresponding.

John

A-2676 UNMATHEMATICAL

I am a girl of sixteen and would like to write to boys my age. I like to do a little of everything, like sports, typing, writing, modeling, records and collecting them. Was never any good at mathematics so had to take a commercial course.

Frances

A-2677 WIDOWER

Here is a forty-six year old widower in South Wales who wants to hear from pals thirty-five to forty-five in America. Am an ex-soldier, twenty-three years in service

(Please turn to page 8)

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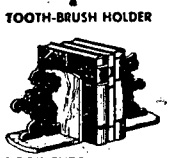
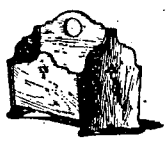

BOOK ENDS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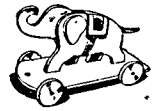
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(Continued from page 6)

and have been in all parts of the world. Don't drink or smoke. Like sports and movies.

Will
(5c postage)

A-2678 MONTANA GIRL

This fifteen year old girl with brown hair and eyes, five feet three, would like to hear from boys and girls all over, especially the West. I enjoy all sports, including swimming, ice skating, roller skating, dancing and horseback riding. Will answer all.

Rusty

A-2679 PRIVATE EYE

I am twenty-nine, have dark brown hair, but a little on the lonely side because I don't drink and can't dance because of a war injury of my left hip. Like waltz music, Hawaiian and Western music, boating, swimming and fishing. Am a private detective.

Doc

A-2680 ORPHAN

Here is a twenty-nine year old man who has been lonely most of his life. He was raised in an orphanage and since then, has not been able to meet many girls, moving around in his work. I am five feet seven with dark eyes and a bit of gray hair. Am Irish and Scotch.

Irish

A-2681 MISS FROM MISS

I am a sixteen year old girl with brown hair, blue eyes and am five feet eight. I like reading, sports, music and animals. I would like to have pen pals from all parts of the country, and other countries too. How about it, pals?

A-2682 OLDER MAN

A man, fifty-two years old, five feet five and a half inches tall, would like to write to some ladies in rural districts, between thirty-five and forty-five years of age. I like to travel, but am in business so don't have much chance to do so. I am very lonesome.

B.B.

A-2683 BLONDIE

Here is a nineteen year old girl with blonde hair, blue eyes and five feet one in height. I am a telephone operator and my favorite pastimes are dancing, basketball, baseball and knitting. I would like to hear from boys and girls my age and older.

Honey

A-2684 LONELY GUY

A lonely, thirty-two year old, guy from Texas would like letters from anyone sixteen to sixty, preferably ladies. I am a veteran, served overseas, am single, six feet two. Don't be bashful, I promise to answer all letters and will try to make them interesting.

Pick

A-2685 WESTERN MISS

This fifteen year old girl is five feet two, and likes reading, biking, roller skating, hiking and writing letters. I want to hear from girls and boys my age. I like all sports, baseball and swimming especially! I have dark brown eyes and hair.

Breezy

A-2686 BOATSMAN

An eighteen year old boy, six feet one, lives on a lake and boats a lot. I have four of them. Also like horseback riding, dancing, archery, sailing, model airplanes and swimming. How are all you pals around the world doing, please drop me a line.

Will

A-2687 GERMAN GIRL

This twenty-nine year old German girl likes music, literature and fashion. I am very lonely, because my mother and only brother live in the Russian zone and I can't even go to see them although it's only about eighty miles from me. I work as a dressmaker and like it.

Bridget
(5c postage)

A-2688 SPORTSWOMAN

I'm a sixteen year old girl, five feet two and a half, have long dark brown hair and eyes. I just love to roller skate and like baseball. I think pen pals are a wonderful way for people to get to know each other, to encourage shy people. Please write soon pals.

Genny

A-2689 COLLECTS MATCH FOLDERS

I am a boy of sixteen, five feet five and a half. I attend a Catholic high school. My hobby is collecting stamps, and match box

(Please turn to page 127)

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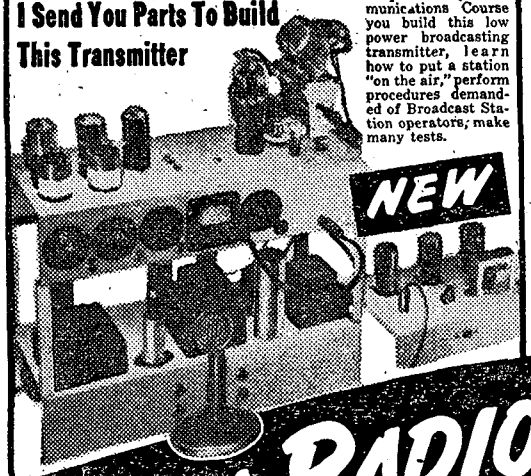
You Practice COMMUNICATIONS

I Send You Parts To Build This Transmitter

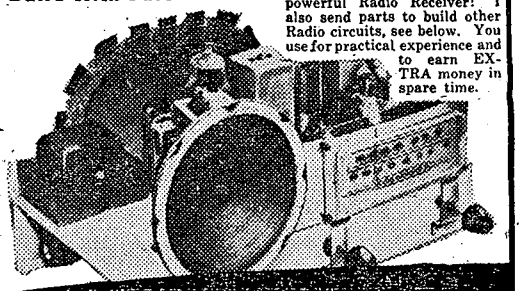
As part of my Communications Course you build this low power broadcasting transmitter, learn how to put a station "on the air," perform procedures demanded of Broadcast Station operators, make many tests.



You Practice Radio SERVICING

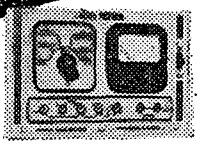
On This Modern Radio You Build With Parts I Send

As part of my Servicing Course, I send you the speaker, tubes, chassis, transformer, loop antenna, EVERYTHING you need to build this modern, powerful Radio Receiver! I also send parts to build other Radio circuits, see below. You use for practical experience and to earn EXTRA money in spare time.



BE A RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIAN

YOU BUILD this Tester with parts I send early in my Servicing Course. Helps you fix neighbors' Radios and EARN EXTRA MONEY in spare time.



YOU BUILD Vacuum Tube Power Pack as part of my Communications Course; get experience with packs of many kinds. Learn how to correct Power Pack troubles.

YOU BUILD this A. M. Signal Generator as part of my Servicing Course. It provides amplitude - modulated signals for many tests and experiments.

Learn Servicing or Communications by Practicing in Spare Time with KITS OF RADIO PARTS I Send

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About All-Story

By FRANCIS FLICK

This question of the "story behind the story" always acts upon me with the sudden chilling effect of jamming my head in a snow bank. Mostly, I suppose, it's because I honestly don't know how I do get story ideas. For me, they're elusive, although occasionally one may pop right at me.

Maybe, one Christmas Eve it was the story idea for *The Miracle Maker* that knocked me flat on my face, or maybe I just skidded on that icy sidewalk. In any event, the result was the same and the black eye I received as a Christmas present was a dandy.

It was seven o'clock on a Christmas Eve in New York, and the fine tall tree in the corner by the fireplace would need at least four times as many ornaments and strings of lights as we had. The tree had been a gift and it was the first cousin to the one in Rockefeller Center. It had the spread of a six engined plane. It had majesty about it that was completely lost in a small apartment, or perhaps it was the apartment that was lost. If you have an idea that this tree was huge and broad of beam, you're on the right track.

The five and ten cent store on Forty-Second Street was open late so I went to buy some large red balls and lights. The curbs were banked with snow so high that you became an alpine climber getting over them. I couldn't get a taxi so I skidded along to the store. There wasn't much left at the ornament counter but they wrapped up what was usable and I went out with an unwieldy box that could have used a truck for hauling.

I crossed Fifth Avenue, looking avidly for an empty cab, and was walking east when I saw a burly cop talking to a small boy.

"You have to have a license to sell puppies on the street," the policeman said. "Now go on, beat it."

"But this is the last one," the boy pleaded. "I gotta sell it."

"Beat it," the cop bellowed.

I was in the midst of this, me and my great big box. Suddenly there was a flurry of movement as the boy jerked away from the policeman. He ran into me; my box flew; my feet flew. I landed on my face and watched my ornaments spilling over the sidewalk.

The policeman helped me up, brushed me off, and we exchanged the usual Yuletide pleasantries. I walked on limply. Half way down the black, I saw the boy waiting, with the puppy still under his coat. He approached me and thrust the dog into my arms.

"Five dollars," he told me.

Well, on Christmas, the tree was still enormous and half naked, but I had a puppy, a very black eye—and a story idea.

All-Story Movie Dividend:

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Paramount's

COPPER CANYON

(Technicolor)

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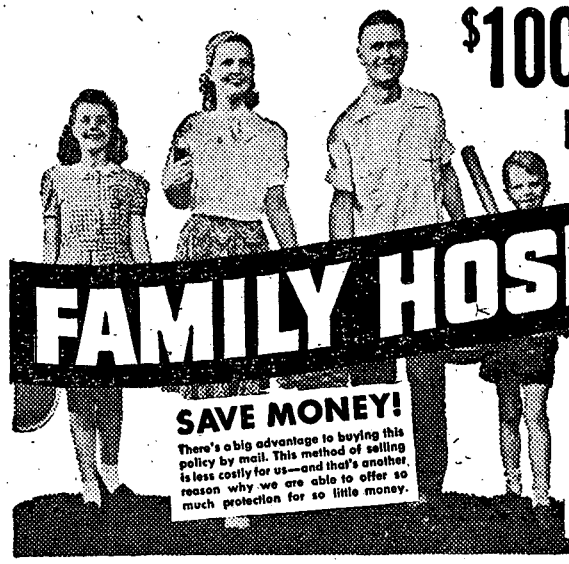

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Policy Pays for a Day, a Week, a Month, a Year—*just as long as necessary for you to be hospitalized!*

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This remarkable Family Hospital Policy covers you and your family for about everything—for *every* kind of accident—and for *all* the common and rare diseases, and there are thousands of them. Serious diseases such as cancer, tuberculosis, heart diseases, diseases involving female organs, and abdominal operations are also fully covered after this policy is in force six months. Suicide, insanity, and venereal diseases are understandably excluded.

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Women who will some day have babies will want to take advantage of a special low cost maternity rider. Pays $50.00 for childbirth confinement either in the hospital or at home, after policy has been in force 10 months. Double the amount on twins.

POLIO
Benefits At No Extra Cost
In lieu of other regular benefits policy pays these benefits if polio strikes—
For Hospital Bills, up to.....$500.00
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For Orthopedic Appliances, up to.....$500.00
TOTAL OF $1,500.00

3c A DAY IS ALL YOU PAY
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THE SERVICE LIFE FAMILY HOSPITAL PLAN

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Reality

You are the song,
The dream, the shine,
For all that's dear,
For all that's mine,—

It will be ever
Measured so . . . . .
I knew I loved you
Long ago.

I cannot tell
The why or how
I knew it then,
I know it now. . . . . .

Though dreams are old
And thin and late
A lamp will burn—
My heart will wait.

—Gladys Martin

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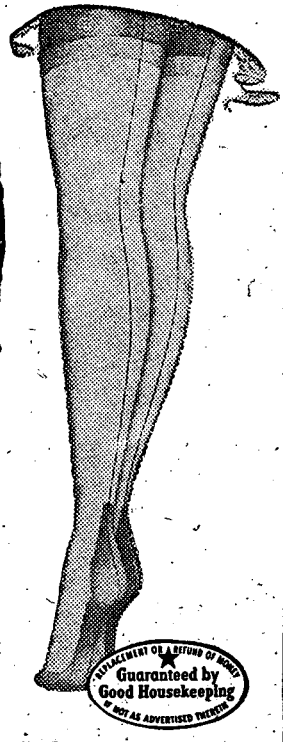

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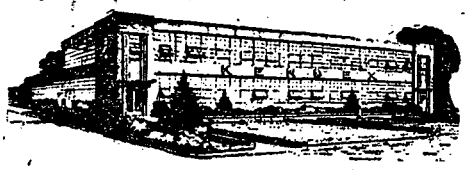

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Santa Claus Husband

"I'm afraid we'll have to pretend we're not married," she said hesitantly.

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By BILL SEVERN

Heartbreak is no yardstick against which to measure a man's love.

THEY danced on the club terrace, with a star-scattered sky above them and the moon-capped silver of the water beyond the sand. Laura drifted in Mike's arms, smiling as she looked up at him. And this was all, only tonight. The hours had already sped away. In the morning, he would drive back to New York, leaving her to the loneliness that had been Florida in December.

Mike had said, "Let's not talk about tomorrow." Laura had pretended with him this was just another evening in the breathless week that had spelled all the

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days and nights with the particular magic of finding each other. Mike McLane was on vacation from the news desk of the *New York Chronicle*. Laura Bradford was in Florida to forget Paul Weldon didn't want her, kept there by her pride.

But pride had been a cold companion in a place filled with winter sun. Palms and the beach and carefree men; a pretty girl without a man, no romance for Laura. Only the disillusion of a broken engagement, the homesick remembrance of what New Hampshire was like before Christmas. Snow on the farm and laughter, the special affinity of friends who had lived all their lives together in a small town. But there would have been sorry smiles and unwanted sympathy for her, if she had stayed this Christmas.

"I have my savings," Laura had told her mother. "I can fly to Florida in a day. Let everyone think I was the one who ran out on Paul."

"Aren't you doing that, Laura?" Her mother had held her a moment. "Oh, my dear. Don't be foolish. Paul loves you. He hasn't chased Carol. She's been after him. You're simply handing him over to her. Paul isn't jilting you. He's too honorable for that. Can't you see you're the one who's making too much of—"

"Of finding them in each other's arms?" Laura broke in. "He wasn't exactly fighting her off. You mean I could hold him to his word, force him to go through with the marriage?" Her mouth twisted and she felt a little sick. "Thanks, but if Carol's what he wants, Paul can have her—and her father's money."

"But Florida's so far away."

"Hardly far enough," she answered. "They must have libraries there. I'll find a job and be happy and Paul can—he can go to—"

"Laura!"

Her thoughts flying South had consigned all the rest of the men in the world to the same place. She would live a spinster and die an old maid; Laura wanted none of them. When nobody offered to hire a librarian, she had found work as a hotel waitress. But not happiness, not until Mike's persistence had brought her alive again to everything that could be young and eager in her heart. Now this was the end of it. His vacation over, Mike was going home.

"Let's get out of here," he whispered softly. His arm holding her, his hand keeping hers as though he never wanted to let her go, Mike led her to the edge of the dance floor. "We'll drive out the highway."

She didn't answer. Laura let her smile agree and was afraid she would cry. They would make believe a while longer, because it had happened too fast to believe in this, too soon and too late. Sensibly, reasonably, Laura knew that, but the logic of her mind was small comfort.

MIKE drove in silence along the strip of road that paralleled the beach. He would stop and park and they would kiss and turn back, with only the week to remember when they finally said good-by. His arm slipped around her and he brought her head down to his shoulder. Mike said, "Did you ever wish on the moon when you were a kid, Laura?"

"It takes a new moon for that." She sighed, glancing up at this wise old one. "Not that I remember it ever did me much good."

"If you could, what would you wish for?"

"Well, I guess—" Laura halted, not looking at him. She smiled a little. "The Chamber of Commerce will hate me for it, but it'd be nice to have a white Christmas."

"Yes," Mike said. "It won't be much like Christmas down here. You'll miss that." He slowed the car.

"What would you wish, Mike?"

"I've already made mine." He kissed her and Laura shut her eyes, not wanting

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him to see what must be in them. Mike told her, "I'd just keep on driving with you now—right on through the dawn without ever turning back."

She tried to answer lightly, fighting the quick tears that would spoil his gentle teasing and rob this last hour of pleasure. But did he have to say that, did Mike have to make it worse? "And you'd take me home for Christmas?" Laura's voice caught. "That would be fun."

"Laura, why don't we?" He drew her close, kissing her again. "Now—tonight. There's nothing to keep you here. Why should I leave you?"

"Please . . ." She did cry then. Pressing her face to his chest, clinging to him, Laura whispered, "Mike don't."

"You can't believe in us?" Tenderly, he lifted her head between his hands, making her look at him. "Oh, Laura—Laura, darling, I love you. You love me. Isn't that enough? Does it take a million years of knowing each other to be any surer than we are right now? We can be married on the way. I checked the law. We can get a license without waiting in North Carolina." Mike let her go. "Or shall I take you back to the hotel?"

He was serious. Laura's thoughts spun in a whiplash of emotions that wouldn't let her think. Mike wanted her. He wanted to take her home, not for Christmas, but forever. It was wild, impulsive, reckless. All her New England upbringing rebelled against it. People didn't marry this way, not her sort of people. "But we can't simply run off in the middle of the night to get married!"

"Why?" he asked once more. "I've got your bags in the back of the car with mine, Laura." He grinned a bit. "If you're angry, I'm sorry. But I told them at the hotel we were eloping."

"Mike, you're crazy." Her laughter broke through, rising with the excitement of knowing it was possible, they could do this. The hope became a want and then an eagerness, a will to make it happen.

He put the car in gear. "Which way do we go?"

"But you don't expect me to—" Shaking her head, she met his eyes. Laura's fingers touched his arms, crept up to his shoulders. "Mike, listen to me. I could come to New York, maybe next week. I could get a job and maybe after we—" Her protest died weakly. Somehow, Laura was kissing him and her heart took it from there.

MIKE already had the car moving, headed north. Her eyes shut, Laura hugged herself to his side. "You know we're both insane, don't you?" she asked. "Stark, raving mad."

"Sure." He laughed. "But it couldn't happen to two nicer people."

Breakfast was at dawn in a roadside diner open all night for the produce truckers who snatched time for chow and a smoke between jumps. It wasn't exactly a spot for dreamy romance, but the sun hadn't sobered Laura. She saw no less happiness in Mike.

He dug out the maps and they traced the route. Laura pointed. "It's still that far to North Carolina?"

"Anxious?" Mike grinned. "You'd better get some sleep on the way. Then you can take the wheel later so we don't lose any time."

"Who can sleep?" She smiled.

"I'm just giving you warning. You'll have to work your way in this marriage."

"Trying to talk me out of it so soon?" Laura teased. "Sorry, mister. You're stuck with me."

Mike laughed again. "That's bad?"

But she wondered when they were back in the car, the miles spinning behind them. Mike hadn't meant anything by it, except that perhaps he felt he should be honest in letting her know his income wasn't large. And then Paul crowded her thoughts a moment, filled Laura's mind with memories, with doubts of herself and this impul-

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sive thing she and Mike were doing. If she could be as wrong as she had been about Paul, knowing him all her life, how could she be so sure with a man she hardly knew at all?

A vacation romance, afternoons on the beach, evenings to dance. Big moon, pretty girl, handsome man. Laura couldn't deny the immediate physical attraction that had brought them together, the quickening in her pulses just glancing at Mike now. But, was it only that? Maybe she was the one making something else of it, because she had lost one man and felt some unconscious need to prove herself.

"Mike," she asked softly, "you're not sorry?"

"Hey!" He turned to her. "What is this?"

Laura looked down. "I mean, it's not too late to change your mind." Her smile wavered unevenly. "You don't have to marry me."

He swung the car off the road so abruptly the truck behind them blared its horn. Mike held her shoulders. "Are you sorry, Laura?"

"No."

"Then don't talk like that." Mike's kiss reassured her. The sweet tenderness of his embrace, the gentle urgency of his wanting her spoke with a silence deeper in its meaning than anything he could have said. But he said it, too. "Darling, I love you."

Laura moved back finally, reluctantly. Her smile full, she lifted Mike's hands and put them on the wheel. "Better keep on driving." It came out a whisper, husky with the emotion she felt. "It's still a long way to North Carolina."

TO HER own surprise, she did sleep, her head contentedly on Mike's shoulder. Laura woke to the realization the car had stopped. Blinking into the sun, she sat up straight. Mike wasn't beside her. For an instant, a swift panic ticked in her pulses and then she knew it was silly.

The car was parked in a gravelled lot at the side of a filling station. Through the dusty window, Laura saw him at the pay phone inside the building. Mike seemed to be arguing, but then he laughed and broke out a grin and Laura relaxed. Whoever Mike had called, he would explain. She had to quit this endless worrying.

Laura opened her purse and got a look in her compact mirror at what the sun and the wind had done to her hair. She found her comb and was using her lipstick when Mike walked out. "You're wasting your time." He winked and bent over swiftly, his lips brushing hers. "See?"

"I've got more." She laughed, pushing him away.

"You were snoring so peacefully, I didn't have the heart to wake you," he said. "We had to stop for gas."

"I do not snore!"

"Well, purring then." Mike laughed with her. He came around the car and got in. 'I had an inspiration. A man's entitled to a honeymoon. I called the *Chronicle*. It took some doing, but they're giving me another week—without pay, of course."

'Oh, Mike." She hugged him. "That's swell."

"Which reminds me. Don't you think you ought to get in touch with your folks, Laura?"

"Yes, I should." She frowned, glancing down as she thought of her mother's shocked reaction to the abrupt announcement that she was marrying a man none of them knew. Laura couldn't do that. She wanted Mother and Dad to meet Mike and like him, to break the news more gently so they would understand this wasn't just running off with somebody else on the rebound from Paul.

"What's the matter, darling?"

"Nothing. Except—" Laura raised her head. "Mike, if we will have another week before you need to be back at work, can't we go right on up to New Hamp-

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shire? It won't seem—quite so wild if we do it that way. I want them to see this is right for us. They will when they know you. And we'll have Christmas together at the farm."

He was silent a moment. "Maybe that would be better." But his eyes searched hers questioningly. "I did promise to take you home for Christmas." Mike nodded. "Sure, we'll do that."

"You planned something else?"

"I was being selfish," he said. "I wanted to show you off to all my friends so they'll know how lucky I am. But that can wait."

"Mike, it's just that it seems so thoughtless, as if I didn't care how my family felt." Laura put her hand on his arm. "I'm proud of you, too." Her voice deepened. "I want everybody to meet you."

THEY crossed the state line into North Carolina late at night. Laura was driving while Mike caught a few winks before he took the wheel again. The boundary sign flickered in the beam of the headlights a moment and she smiled.

She looked at Mike, his head back on the seat while the moonlight played across his face. Keeping her smile, Laura drove on. The little towns she passed through seemed shut up tight, deserted.

Mike stretched a bit. Rubbing his eyes, he yawned and pulled himself up. "I'll take it for a while," he said. "Where are we?"

"North Carolina."

"Where?" He came wide awake. Twisting around, Mike faced her. "Well, why don't you stop?"

Laura laughed. "Right here, darling?"

"The next place we come to. Why did you let me sleep? Why—" Mike let out his breath and smiled with her. "Don't mind me. I always feel this way before a wedding."

"Oh? How many have you had?"

"None." He grinned. "But what I mean—"

"Calm down, Mike." Laura patted his arm. "Not that I can, but I'm afraid it's not going to do us much good to be in a hurry. Everything that looks like a town is closed. People are home in bed this time of night."

"We'll get them out of bed," he told her. "You'll be Mrs. McLane before tomorrow morning."

But she wasn't. The police officer they finally located explained patiently there was no way they could get a license at that hour, even if they could stir up somebody to marry them.

Laura walked back to the car with Mike, her hand in his, knowing his disappointment because of her own. "Might as well keep going," he said glumly. "We'll head on across the state. One courthouse is as good as another, whenever they start to open them."

"As long as it's legal."

But Laura didn't feel in the mood for joking about it. Still, another night wouldn't matter. This was for the rest of their lives.

It seemed almost as though some fate were keeping her from being reckless, sobering the romantic impulse that had started them toward marriage. Whether they liked it or not, she and Mike had been forced to wait, to think about what they were doing, realize it was more than a whim.

"Maybe the thing to do is find a tourist cabin. We can get some rest and freshen up." Mike rubbed his chin. 'I need a shave and we should break out our coats and put on warmer clothes. After breakfast, we'll take the rest of the day if we need it." His grin returned. "A bride and groom ought to have some place to come home to."

Laura stared at him, tracing his grin, trying to read what else was in his expression. Her breath held an instant. "A cabin, Mike?"

"Well, two cabins." He turned.

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"Hey . . ." Mike's face flushed. "What did you think I meant? Don't you know me better than that?"

"I think it's a good idea," she interrupted, smiling again as she felt the warmth rise in her own cheeks. She did know better. She should, with Mike. "This dress of mine is all right to live in, but I would like to wear something less wrinkled for my wedding."

THE MAN in the motor camp gave them adjoining cabins, but he eyed them wonderingly until Mike had explained.

"Oh, gettin' hitched, are you?" He nodded and inspected the register. "Out of state? Well, good luck to both of you. Anythin' I can do to be helpful, let me know. Happens my niece works down to the court. You mention my name. Might save you some of the fuss. John Clem, but she's an Edmund. Martha Edmund."

"I'll do that." Mike thanked him. Outside, he got the bags from the car and put Laura's in her cabin. Mike dropped the key on her bureau. "Well, I'll see you in the morning."

"Yes . . ."

They stood a moment, looking at each other while their eyes made promises. Laura moved a step toward him and Mike took her in his arms.

His kisses swept her with a rushing happiness that raced her pulses and throbbed in the deep hollow of her throat, left her trembling as Laura pressed close. Mike's fingers touched her hair, her face. His hands caressed her and his arms slipped down around her once more.

She turned her head. "Mike." It was hardly a denial, but she stepped back from him. Laughing then, she gave him a gentle shove toward the door. "Get out of here."

But they kissed again on the steps and it was awfully hard to say good night.

There was no trouble getting the license in the morning, with the help of John Clem's niece. She suggested the chapel. "I don't know how you feel about it," she said, smiling at Laura, "but there's something about being married in a church. This is really a beautiful little country parish, out on the highway a few miles. I send a lot of people there. Couples come over from Virginia."

"I'd like that." Laura turned. "Mike, let's."

Driving there, it seemed more than a few miles. They came to a cross-road, with signs pointing to unfamiliar villages. Mike started to turn right, but Laura shook her head. "I'm sure it must be the other way from what she told us."

"Whatever you say." He swung the car around. "I'll be honest. I don't know where we are."

The macadam ran out the other side of a stretch of woods and the road became red sand. It was filled with ruts and bumps. Added to everything else that tried their patience, the sun had gone in and the day turned bitter cold with a heavy-clouded threat of storm. "I was wrong," Laura admitted. "Next time, I'll keep quiet."

"Might as well follow it out," Mike said. "We'll find some place we can ask—" His words broke with a shout as he swerved the car. "Laura, look out!"

She caught a brief flash of something hurtling toward the window at her side, some wild bird that had winged through the brush crowding the road. Mike's arm grabbed her, bringing her head down against him to shield her. The car bounced out of control as the glass cracked with a thud.

It didn't shatter, but before Mike could slam on the brakes, the rear end slewed off the road into a ditch, tipping them dizzily as the wheels settled into the soft earth.

Laura was shaking, her nerves screaming. Mike's face, as he looked at her and

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tried to speak, was white with concern. They held to each other a moment, Laura getting control of herself.

"You're all right?" he asked unevenly.

"I think so."

She felt the tension gradually go out of his arms. "That was too close." He drew his breath. "I should have had more sense than to let go of the wheel. But when I saw that thing coming at you—"

"It was my fault, Mike." Laura shook her head. "I told you to take this road."

"You didn't whistle up a pheasant." He put the car into gear. The wheels spun. Mike rocked it forward, snapping the clutch up as he booted the gas pedal.

He cut the motor and stepped out to look. "We're digging it deeper." Mike found some branches and wedged them underneath. He climbed in and tried again.

They didn't budge. He swore softly. "You take it, Laura. I'll try to push." Mike went around to the back and she slid over. But he had to give up after a few minutes. "It's no use," he told her. "We're plain stuck."

"But there aren't any houses. Mike, what can we do?"

"The road must lead somewhere," he answered grimly. "I'd better start walking."

"You're not going to leave me here?"

"Laura, I won't be long. You can't hike in those shoes. If there's nothing around the bend—" He halted. Worriedly, Mike jammed his hands into his pockets. "You're right. This is no place for you to be alone."

But he was right about her shoes. Her feet and her legs and the small of her back ached before they had trudged a mile down the road. The only thing beyond the bend was more road. Glancing up, she saw the sky was darker. That was fine. That was wonderful. Her mouth twisted. All they needed now was rain.

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IT DIDN'T rain. They got snow—fine gray flakes of it at first, floating down gently, quickening their steps. And then great wet gobs whipped by the freezing wind that blew up behind the storm. Shivering little trickles drenched down inside her coat, wooshed up beneath her skirt until she was soaked.

"White Christmas," Mike said dryly. "Looks like you'll get your wish."

She slipped and caught herself, glaring at him. "You're not very funny."

"Sorry." His arm came around her to help her. Soberly, he told her, "I am sorry, Laura, for all of this."

"Well, I didn't wish—"

Laura saw the truck come up over the hill. She yelled and waved and stood out in the middle of the road shouting so the driver had to stop.

He was a farmer in a hurry to get where he was going and not too eager to help when Mike explained what was wrong. "I got no tow chain, buddy," he said. "Hate to turn you down, but I'd get caught myself trying to shove you out, and that'd do no good. This stuff turns to swamp mud when it's wet. Be glad to give you a lift into the garage in town."

"Thanks." Mike looked at him as though he wanted to say something different. He let it go and helped Laura into the truck.

She sat between them, wedged into the narrow seat by the man's bulking shoulders. His glance went from her to Mike. "How'd you wind up back here? Get lost?"

"Took a wrong turn," Mike said. "We were on our way to get married."

"Yeah?" He laughed.

Mike didn't laugh. "Yeah."

The driver shrugged. "Well, you sure picked the day."

But at least they were out of the storm. The village they came into was small, but the garage did have a tow truck. "You stay here and keep warm," Mike said. "I'll go back with him to get the car."

Laura found a heater in the office while they were gone. She shook out her coat and draped it over the chair, took off her shoes and stockings and stood on the mat in front of it, holding her skirt out from her legs to dry. Sneezing, she touched her hand to the stringy, wet mop of her hair.

It seemed forever before he returned. But Laura forgot her own discomfort when she saw Mike. If he hadn't been soaked and half frozen before, he was now. Stopping to brush the snow from his sleeves, he stepped into the office. Mike shook his head. "What a mess."

She knew he didn't mean her, but she was a mess. Not the beautiful girl he had asked to marry him, this unkempt creature before him. She couldn't have made herself less attractive if she had tried. Certainly not much incentive for a man to hurry her off to a wedding.

"You'd better get dried out," Laura told him. "Here, you get in front of the heater."

He unbuttoned his coat and slipped out of his jacket. "Laura, does it have to be a church? This fellow never heard of the place. But there's a judge here in town."

"Before we run into any more trouble, you mean?" She glanced down. "No, I don't care, Mike. Not really. Whatever you think."

"You don't care?" He turned to her and she felt his eyes searching for hers. "Laura . . ." Mike dropped his jacket to the chair. He held her arms, waiting for her to look up at him. When she didn't, he said, "You don't have to go through with this. If you've changed your mind, just tell me so."

Her heart stilled to the catch of her breathing. For an instant everything within her went dead. Laura had to force the question, "Have you?"

"I never will." His grin came slowly and he gave her a little shake as he let her go. "What's wrong with us, asking each other things like that? Get your shoes on,

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Laura. I'll go phone the judge and tell him he's got a couple of customers."

SHE LAUGHED. It was all right. Mike loved her—of course he did. What they felt for each other was nothing so temporary a ditched car or a snow storm could change it. Her mind brushed aside the tiny, recurrent doubt, the echo of his words, *"What's wrong with us?"*

Her stockings were still damp, but she put them on, fastening them swiftly, smoothing her skirt. There was an excitement in her fingers, in her hands and her arms and lifting all through her with a renewed eagerness that made her smile big against the petty annoyance of the comb which snagged in her hair. That didn't bother her. If the bride looked slightly bedraggled, Mike wouldn't care. He wanted *her*, not because she had been something to whistle at on the beach, or a junior-grade glamour girl dancing with him in the moonlight.

Mike wanted her for herself and the knowledge was a shining thing. Let it snow; let it storm. If Mike could marry her as she was, then it must be love. The whole day became amusing, but the glow that warmed her with sheer exuberance was strictly a bride's.

Turning to the chair, Laura caught up her coat and Mike's jacket. As she put them across her arm, his wallet slipped out and fell to the floor.

Laura reached for it and then halted. Picking it up, she straightened slowly, staring at the picture beneath the plastic flap of his wallet.

The girl was blonde, and quite beautiful. Almost hidden at one corner of the photo, the small inscription read: *Always, Miriam.*

She closed her eyes. Laura snapped the wallet shut and quickly dropped it back into his pocket, drawing her hand away as if by doing that she needn't know it was there. Miriam could be Mike's sister.

"All set, darling?" Mike came back. "I've made the arrangements. The judge reminded me we need a ring. He says there's a jewelry store—" He crossed to her, frowning. "Laura darling, what's the matter?"

"I was thinking about—your people. Shouldn't you let them know?"

His frown became more puzzled. "I have nobody," he said. "My dad died a couple of years ago."

Laura glanced away. "Nobody else?"

"An aunt in Ohio and a few cousins." Mike put his hand on her arm. "What made you ask?"

"I found your wallet on the floor." She raised her head. "There's a picture in it," she said. "Mike, who is Miriam?"

"Oh . . ." His face tightened a moment. "I forgot I still had that." Mike spoke as though he were thinking aloud, but not wanting to remember. "I thought I was in love with her, but I wasn't. I guess you'd call Miriam sort of a habit. Does that sound cynical? I don't know what else to say. Anyhow, it's over."

The image of Paul filled Laura's mind and she found swift understanding in it. They were two of a kind, she and Mike. He had been mistaken, too. "Miriam wanted somebody else?"

"We both did," he answered slowly. "Laura, I wanted somebody like you." He reached into his jacket. Taking the picture from his wallet, Mike tore it across and dropped the pieces. "Miriam," he said, "was the girl I didn't marry."

"Mike." Laura kissed him. She pressed her cheek to his.

Red and green paper garlands criss-crossed the window of the jewelry store and through the real snow that blew against the glass, a silvery-tinsel sign proclaimed MERRY XMAS—HAPPY NEW YEAR. It wasn't until Monday that Saint Nick was due down the chimnews, but no gift then could match what today was bringing Laura. And the Happy

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New Year—she was already sure of that. With Mike, it would be the happiest year of her life.

THE RING in Mike's possession, Laura's hand hugged beneath his arm, they drove to the judge's home. He opened the door for them and led the way into the parlor, where his housekeeper was waiting to serve as a witness.

The judge was a pleasant little man with a detached manner. He peered at Mike near-sightedly over his glasses. "You folks have a license?"

"Right here." Mike handed it to him.

He put it on his paper-cluttered desk, fumbling around for a pen as though all of this were only an annoying formality. But when he began the ceremony, his simple sincerity made Laura conscious of every deeply-spoken word. Their marriage was no bond to be taken lightly; it was Mike and Laura and forever, giving themselves to each other in the sober knowledge of their love.

Laura's eyes filled and in the quiet awareness of the moment there was a beauty as solemn as the hushed reverence in church. She had no altar, no organ to play, no flowers, no lovely gown. With Paul, there might have been all of that, friends and relatives to wish her well, and her mother proudly watching the fulfillment she had always wanted for Laura.

With Mike, she had a country parlor and a marrying judge. But with Mike placing the ring on her finger, Mike kissing her— Who was Paul to the blissfully happy Mrs. Michael McLane?

Outside, his arm around her, Mike grinned. "Home?"

Laughing, she said, "Home, Mike."

They found the main highway and didn't get lost, but it was a wonder they didn't, the way he kept looking at her more than the road. The wind had lessened and the storm gone out of it so the snow fell more gently.

Turning the car into the motor court, Mike stopped it beside the cabins. He scooped her up into his arms, swinging her high from the ground.

"Mike!" Laura clung to him, laughing again, her legs kicking to get her balance. "Put me down. Darling, what will people think?"

He winked, shoving open the door. "If I can't carry my bride across the threshold—" Mike stopped abruptly. His grin faded in surprise as he let Laura's feet touch the floor.

Sitting bolt upright on the bed, the man who stared back at them looked fully as startled. He had his shoes off and his tie loosened from his collar, a magazine clutched in his hand.

"What are you doing here?" Mike demanded.

"Maybe you better answer that. Busting in on a guy like—" The man let out his breath, relaxing a bit. His glance knowingly went from Mike to Laura. "Take her somewhere else, pal. You got the wrong cabin."

Mike stepped toward him, his hands clenched. "This happens to be my wife."

"That's your business." The man stood up. "Look, I don't want any trouble. I paid for the night in this rat trap."

"Mike, please," Laura broke in. "There must be some mistake."

"I'll say there is!" But Laura knew Mike didn't want any trouble either. He took her arm. "Come on. We'll see about this."

"Been wonderin' about you two when you didn't come back," John Clem said as they entered the office. "Thought maybe in the weddin' excitement you forgot your things." He chuckled. "I had your bags moved out and been holdin' them safe for you."

"You moved us out?" Mike's mouth tightened as though it took all his self-control to hold in what he was thinking. "But we're staying over night."

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"Didn't mention it to me. Figured you'd be in a hurry to get on to New York or wherever you're goin'." He shook his head. "Most times I'd have some place to put you up, but we got crowded early on account of the storm. Been turning folks away for hours." Scratching his chin, he picked up the phone book: "Tell you what. There's a hotel right across the state line. Friend of mine. I'll ring him, if you want."

Mike turned questioningly to Laura. She tried to smile. He nodded without enthusiasm. "Thanks."

BUT THERE were no rooms available at the hotel. Clem made another call for them. Listening as he laughingly explained to somebody that they were honeymooners, Laura moved over to the window, embarrassed. This was something she and Mike should share alone, not with the whole countryside trying to find them a place to stay.

Glancing at her, Mike seemed to sense Laura's feelings. He thanked Clem again and told him, "Never mind. I guess we'll just go along."

They didn't speak as Mike packed their bags into the rear of the car. Laura kept her eyes down when he slid in behind the wheel. The accident and all their troubles, the smirking cheapness of the man in the cabin, and now this public haggling. It spoiled everything, and Laura didn't want their marriage to start that way. "Mike," she said softly, hoping he would understand, "do we have to stop anywhere tonight?"

'I know," he said. Mike's voice deepened. "You're my wife, not some—babe I happened to pick up." He shook his head. "We're both upset and tired out and there's nothing right. Laura, I'm sick now, thinking what I've put you through."

She smiled, loving him again for saying what she couldn't say. Mike did understand. His unselfish concern was for her, and because he wanted more than this, too. "Driving the rest of the way won't be too hard," she told him. "We'll manage to get some rest in the car, taking turns."

"No," he answered. "If we're going to be sensible, the thing to do is put you on the train. You can get a Pullman straight through from Washington to Boston and make connections there. I'll drive into New York, get things straightened at the apartment and then come on up to Banning Sunday to meet you."

"But Mike, I don't want to be without you that long."

"If you think it'll be any easier for me, you're crazy." He grinned. "But we'll have all Christmas week together, as we planned. You'll be able to break the news to your folks, instead of just turning up with a husband."

Laura phoned from Washington to tell her family she was on the way home, but she didn't mention Mike. Her mother was excited and glad to hear her voice. "I've been so worried over you, Laura," she

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said. "But I knew you'd come when you got my letter about Paul."

"Your letter?"

"Dear, we'll be at the station," her mother went on. "It *is* going to be a wonderful Christmas, having you back."

Laura finished talking and put up the receiver slowly, bothered by the conversation. Her family thought she had quit her job in Florida simply because of a letter begging her to come home for the holidays, that she might have changed her mind about Paul. Apparently he and Carol hadn't married yet. Paul had always been her mother's choice for a future son-in-law, and the unspoken hope that it still might not be too late had been in her voice on the phone.

FROWNING as she left the booth, Laura gave her hand to Mike. She wished she hadn't agreed to go on without him, however sensible it was. Her fingers hugged his tightly. When they reached the platform, Laura turned to him and kissed him, her arms around Mike pleading not to leave him.

But maybe this was better for Mike, even if he had been thinking only of her in suggesting it. Everything would be settled by the time he reached the farm. Mike would be accepted as her husband, without any awkward explanations.

Her ticket was bought and the other passengers were on the train, some of them already asleep in their berths. Laura got aboard. Waving to Mike through the window as the wheels started moving, she smiled and managed not to cry.

The bed was soft, and her whole body ached with the weariness of every mile she had come, but it was hours before Laura fell into a restless, fretful sleep. All the way to Boston, and even more after she had changed there for the rest of the journey home, Laura felt terribly alone. Without cause, she somehow felt afraid. She saw the familiar landmarks on the outskirts of Banning, everything blanketed now in snow. There were skaters on the lake, and a group of laughing, ruddy-faced youngsters in an old-fashioned horse-drawn sleigh that waited at one of the grade crossings for the train to pass. She saw heavily chained tires on the cars in town; the library and all the buildings she knew so well.

Laura buttoned her coat and smoothed her gloves to her fingers. There was strength in the tiny, still-new pressure of her wedding ring. She *was* Mike's wife. Nobody could change that. Smiling, she tried to shake off her sudden unreasoned anxiety.

The conductor helped with her bags. Thanking him as she stepped from the train, Laura looked for her family. She frowned slightly and glanced in the other direction. All at once her head came up and her shoulders stiffened. She lost her smile.

"Laura!" Paul hurried across to her, catching her hands. "Gee, it's good to see you."

Before she could stop him, he leaned over and kissed her. Laura's eyes shut an instant to the touch of his lips, the swift memory of everything Paul had once meant to her. Wondering about Carol, she turned her head and pushed away from him.

He stepped back, looking at her a second, lowering his eyes. "Guess I shouldn't have done it like that, should I? We can't just pick up where we—" Paul stopped. "I'll take your things. My car's around the other side."

"There's no need for you to bother, Paul. Mother said she and Dad would meet me."

"I saved them the trip in," he said. "They're waiting home for you."

"Oh . . ." Her mother must have arranged that.

"Come on." Paul led the way. "We can talk going out."

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THERE seemed to be nothing else she could do. Laura followed him reluctantly. She decided maybe it was just as well to have it said. He got in beside her and started the car.

"Everything around Banning looks just the same," she said.

"It hasn't been. Not with you gone, Laura."

"Paul." She faced him. "There's something you should know. You see, I'm—"

"You came home," he interrupted. His words rushed out as though he had gone over them in his mind, waiting to tell her. "That's all I want to know. I don't expect you to fall into my arms. Maybe you can't forgive me. Maybe I don't deserve it. I'm sorry for what happened. I was a fool to let you leave. But I thought if you loved me, you'd have the faith to believe in me. Carol was just fun and I guess it did go too far, but when you wouldn't listen, I got as stubborn as you were."

Laura said, "Paul . . . I'm married."

"You're *what*?" He stared in disbelief, as though he were sure it must be a joke. "But that—that's impossible."

"Very much married. Just as much in love with him," she answered quietly. "That's why I came home, to tell the folks and spend Christmas with Mike here."

"You can't be!" Paul gripped the wheel. "Laura, what crazy thing have you done? Did you want to hurt me that much, throwing yourself at some—some stranger just to satisfy your pride?"

"Aren't you being conceited?" She smiled a little. "I didn't throw myself at Mike."

"Mike." He made it sound like swearing. "You couldn't possibly have known him more than a few months. Mike who?"

"The name," she told him, "is Mrs. Michael McLane."

Paul swung his car violently up into the driveway between the barn and the house. He jerked on the hand brake. Slamming the door open, he took her bags, his boots crunching angrily in the snow.

Her mother came out to the porch, her father following. Laura kissed them both and forgot Paul a moment in the happiness of being with her family. Her mother said, "Luke, help Paul with Laura's things. And don't track the wet all through the parlor. Just leave them here in the hall." Her father's easy-going nod humored her and he tossed a tiny wink to Laura. That much hadn't changed, for sure. Outdoors, he was boss, but her mother still gave the orders around the house. It was seldom Dad crossed her, not because he was meek, but because Laura's parents had long ago found the way of doing for each other.

Mother turned to Paul. "You'll stay a while?"

"No." He was barely polite. "Thanks. Not now." Without looking at Laura, he went down the steps. The gears ground and his car bucked as he drove it away.

"What in the world? Laura, what did you say to him?" Her disappointment was obvious. "I hope you two didn't quarrel."

"You shouldn't have sent him to the station, Mother," Laura said. "I'm sorry if he got the wrong idea about my coming home. But you knew how I felt."

"We won't talk about it now." She patted Laura's shoulder. "You've had such a long trip. Come on, dear. You just stretch out on your bed. We'll unpack your things later. Are you hungry? Would you like some coffee or something to eat?"

"Mother, I—" She stopped as they entered her room. "I've invited someone to spend Christmas with us. He—he'll be here tomorrow."

"He?"

"Mike McLane. I know you and Dad will like him." She smiled. "I do."

"You asked him here? Laura, do you think that was wise? Whatever you and Paul have to settle won't be helped by having a third person around."

"Won't you please understand?" Laura

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drew her breath. "I'm through with Paul. That was all over when I went to Florida. It's done and finished and Paul's nobody to me. He was a—a habit. A boy I used to know before I met Mike." Seeing the hurt in her mother's face, she couldn't go on.

"You haven't done anything foolish? You're not—engaged to this man?"

"No. Not engaged." Laura looked away, groping for the words that had to be said, knowing the shock they would bring.

"How did you meet him? You never mentioned him in your letters."

LAURA realized how the truth would sound. A pick-up on the beach, someone she had known only a week. "Mike was staying at the hotel," she answered. "He's a newspaper man, a reporter for the *New York Chronicle*."

And so much more than that, so much she could never explain. The sudden magic, the night and the stars and Mike making her know they were for each other, belonging more in a single kiss than if they had all the years of growing up she had shared with Paul. But how could Laura tell her that?

The telephone rang in the lower hall. Its abrupt jangling cut through her thoughts. Maybe that was Mike now, calling because he wanted to hear her voice again, because he missed her as much as she missed him. Her heart lifting with quick excitement, Laura said, "I'll answer it. That's probably for me."

She ran down the stairs, escaping the discussion with her mother. Laura scooped up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Long distance," the operator said. "I have a collect call for Miss Laura Bradford."

Mike must be in a phone booth, somewhere he couldn't get change. Her breath pounding, Laura nodded impatiently and then smiled as she realized the operator couldn't see her. "Yes," she said. "Speaking."

"From Waterberg, Virginia," the girl told her. "Mr. Seth Foster. Will you accept the charges?"

"Where?" Her smile faded as the operator repeated it. Frowning, Laura sat down slowly. She should have known it wasn't Mike. He wouldn't ask for Miss Bradford. "Who did you say?" Completely puzzled by the unfamiliar name, Laura's nerves tensed with momentary alarm. Maybe Mike had been in an accident with the car after he had left her. But he wouldn't be driving back through Virginia. "All right. Put Mr. Foster on."

"I've been worried my telegram didn't reach you folks," the man said. "Been trying to locate you since yesterday."

Laura remembered the voice. Seth Foster was the country judge who had married them. "Telegram?"

"You didn't get it? I was afraid of that." He cleared his throat. "There's been a serious mistake, Miss Bradford. Is McLane there with you? I traced his number in New York, but there wasn't any answer. Guess you'd better let me talk to him."

"No, he isn't—" She gripped the receiver tightly. "Oh, please—what is wrong?"

"Your license was issued in North Carolina," he said. "It's no good in Virginia. Didn't take a good squint at the paper until after you two had left and I saw it was printed up different. You must have come across the state line without knowing."

"It's no good?" She rose to her feet. "You mean, we're not married?"

"There was no legal ceremony. The same as if it never happened." He went on explaining to her, but Laura didn't hear the rest. Too stunned to think, she couldn't answer. He said, "I'm not excusing my part in mixing things up, but there's nothing much I can do about it.

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You understand? There'll be no record of this at all."

She finally made some reply. Numbly, she stood there after she had put down the receiver, still unable to accept the enormity of it. Mike wasn't hers. *"The same as if it had never happened . . ."* She had no husband; he had no wife. There was no Mrs. Michael McLane.

Everything had been against them, keeping them apart. Nothing had been right. Thousands of couples ran off and were married. But she and Mike had fought their luck all the way. And now, this. As though it were never meant to be.

"You can't believe in us?" Mike had asked. *"I love you. You love me. Isn't that enough?"*

Laura heard her mother on the stairs. There was nothing to tell her now. Mike was a friend, coming for a visit; a stranger Laura had met and invited home for the holidays, not a man come to claim his bride. The rest was only what might have been or what might be, but there was no use to say, "I thought I was married."

"Was that your young man, Laura? Has he changed his plans?"

"No." She raised her head. "Mike will be here."

The back door bumped as her father came in from the barn. "Luke," her mother called, "I want you to bring up some wood for the fireplace."

THE WHOLE world had collapsed around her, but nobody knew. Glancing down, Laura saw she still had her gloves on, hiding the wedding ring she would have shown her mother and dad, its silver band mocking her now. She couldn't wear it. If she hadn't been home to answer the phone, if she and Mike had gone on together, believing they were married—But that would have made it worse.

Laura felt as though she were two persons, one of her making conversation with the family, sitting at the table when supper was ready, automatically going through the motions of being herself while the other Laura was lost in the confusion of desperately planning what to do.

"It's still light enough for us to go find a Christmas tree," her father said. "Bundle yourself into something warm and we'll take the truck up to the woods, Laura. We've been waiting for you to pick us a good one."

That had been part of Christmas since she was a kid, going with her father to select a tree for him to cut, bringing it in to stand between the front windows in the parlor. Remembering, Laura smiled a little.

But the mood didn't touch her inwardly, the spirit wasn't there. The warmth of sentiment, the gayety and happiness weren't for her. Tomorrow was Sunday, Christmas Eve. She had almost forgotten. Sunday had been so much more to her as the day she and Mike would be together.

She had to get in touch with Mike. That was what she must do. The plans were his to make as well as hers. It couldn't wait until he arrived.

"Can we drive through town on the way back, Dad?" she asked. "The stores will be open. I have some shopping to do."

Laura could call Mike from the drugstore more privately. It might be difficult to reach him, but somehow she would. The decision lifted her gloom.

Mike would be as stunned as she had been, but they hadn't lost each other. They could be married here, a wedding at the church. This time, without the recklessness and doubts; this time, for sure.

There was a clean, fresh tang in the wind that stung Laura's cheeks and buffeted her hair as she rode beside her father in the truck. He said, "What about this Mike?"

So her mother had spoken to him, and her father had been told to have a little talk with her. Imagining what had gone

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between them, Laura smiled as she looked up. "I'm in love with him."

"Just like that?" He was silent a minute. "You know I've never tried to interfere, but your mother feels pretty much upset."

"Oh, Dad." She shook her head. 'I know what I'm doing."

He wasn't a man for making much show of his affections, but Laura sensed his understanding in the way he studied her. "I think maybe you do." He put his hand over hers. "Anyhow, you're old enough to know without us meddling in." He grinned a bit, and Laura was struck by the fleeting resemblance of his grin to Mike's. He said, "I'll be glad to meet him. Now, let's find us a good tree."

There was a festive air about the town this Saturday night, the shop windows aglow with colored lights, friends pausing to talk and merrily wish each other well. Leaving her father in the truck, Laura got change at the drugstore and went into the phone booth.

The long distance operator finally sifted Mike's number from the various McLanes in Manhattan. But Laura's uneasiness returned as the phone began to ring. It would be all right. It had to be. And yet, the news she had for Mike would be a blow.

IF HE wasn't at his apartment, she could try the *Chronicle*. Maybe someone there would know where to find him. Laura was about to hang up when she finally got an answer. There was a loud din of music and laughter at the other end. A woman's voice broke through it. "Hello?"

"Is this—" Laura halted. "I guess I must have the wrong number."

"You want Mike?" The noise was muffled momentarily. "Shut up, everybody. I can't hear."

Mike's voice came in from somewhere in the room. "Was that the phone, Miriam?" There was a pause and then he spoke into it. "Hello?"

Laura closed her eyes. Unsteadily, her fingers fumbled for the hook and dropped the receiver into it, cutting the line dead.

A sick dizziness swept over her, pounding in her head, throbbing at her temples. Laura wanted to cry out against the knowledge which had to be a lie. But the booth still echoed with it. This was how Mike missed her. With music and laughter —with Miriam.

How long she stayed there, Laura didn't know. Her legs wouldn't move. Her eyes blurred to the tears she tried to hold back.

Laura picked up her purse. Blindly, she went to the street. The exhilaration of the night had gone. She held her coat against the chill pull of the wind. All around her, people were shopping for last-minute gifts. A white Christmas. A Merry Christmas.

Wanting to be away from it and alone, Laura crossed the walk with her head down. She felt the hand touch her shoulder before she saw him.

"I want to talk to you, Laura," Paul said. "There's something damned funny about all of this."

"Paul, I'm in a hurry. Dad's waiting."

He glanced behind her to the drugstore. "Let's go in there where we can sit down."

"No, I—"

"Your mother called me a few minutes ago," he broke in. "She said you were in town and if I happened to bump into you, I should ask you to bring back some hard candy for the tree. It was obvious she was asking me to meet you. She certainly doesn't know you're married. If you are, why are you keeping it so secret? You were quick enough to tell me."

"I can't help what Mother does." Laura looked at him directly. "I've told you how I feel. Is there any way I can say it more clearly?"

"If you want to know what I think, this whole thing is an act you're putting on to pay me back for Carol." He stuffed his

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hands into his pockets. "I haven't seen Carol for months. She's not even here. She's in Boston."

"Carol wouldn't have you?" Laura couldn't help smiling a little. "I'm sorry, Paul. It seems to be unanimous, doesn't it?" She spoke bluntly. If the words stung, Paul had asked for them. "Even if—I were free, I'd still be too much in love with Mike to know you're alive. I'm his and I'll always be his, and you're wasting your time."

SHE WALKED away. But saying it, Laura knew it was true. Married to Mike or not, having him or losing him, there would never be anybody else for her. She had run out on Paul as easily as she walked from him now, not because her pride was big but because she hadn't loved Paul enough to fight for him. She had gone off to Florida and left him to Carol.

But she had to fight for Mike. Without pride, with all her heart, any way she could. And even if all the odds were against her, Laura would fight before she let Miriam have him.

Riding home in the truck, Laura decided. It would be a dangerous gamble, maybe a foolish one, but it would give her a chance. Mike thought they were still married. Eventually, she would have to tell him it wasn't so, but not right away. Whatever had brought him to Miriam again, Laura wouldn't let him know he was free. Mike would be with her and Miriam in New York. For at least a little while, Laura could make him think of her as his wife, make Mike find his love. She could try.

Ironically, it was Paul who had said it for her. "I thought if you loved me, you'd have the faith to believe in me." Laura had that faith in Mike; she had to believe in him. The promise of their marriage would be in Mike's mind every minute they were together. When he admitted his love, she could tell him the truth and the rest wouldn't really be a lie. Mike would know then why she had done it, loving him.

LAURA was waiting at the window Sunday afternoon. She saw Mike's car before it turned up toward the house. Smiling, she hurried out to him.

Mike took her in his arms and kissed her. If he had come to her only because he thought he wasn't free to stay with Miriam, his arms didn't reveal it in the way he held her close. "Darling," he whispered softly. "Laura . . ."

She moved back at last, hugging his hand in hers. "Miss me?"

"What do you think?" He grinned and rumpled her hair. "It was pretty bad."

Even last night? Laura wondered. With her? But she put Miriam from her mind. Laura said quickly, "I haven't told the family we were married. Mike, I—I couldn't. I'm afraid we'll have to pretend we're not, until we can explain. After they meet you—" She broke it off as her mother and dad came to the porch. Laura introduced Mike to them.

Mike's expression was worried. But there was something else in it, more than surprise or disappointment. Laura couldn't decide what it was. He covered his reaction as he nodded to her mother and shook hands with her dad. "Hope I won't be crowding you?"

"Not at all," her mother answered. "Laura didn't give us much notice, but we're glad you could come. It's always nice to meet her friends. I'm afraid I'll have to apologize for the way the place looks. You know how it is just before Christmas. I've been too busy cooking to give much hand to the house. We're having a little party tonight. But do come in, Mr. McLane. Dear, you take him up to his room."

Laura felt her face flush with annoyance that became a sharp, momentary anger. Whatever her mother was cooking hadn't

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been in the kitchen. A little party. Paul undoubtedly would be among those invited. She had enough troubles without that.

"Right upstairs, Mike," Laura said, showing him the way. At the landing, she slipped her hand into his. "I'm sorry. I didn't know about tonight."

"Maybe it's just as well." He frowned. "I mean, if you had to keep it from them, it'll be less awkward with somebody else around." A hint of his grin came back, but it wasn't much of one. "Was it so hard to admit we were married?"

"Not that." She glanced down. "But the way everything happened as soon as I got home."

"I can guess." Mike dropped his hands. "We did rush into this without thinking very clearly, didn't we?"

Was he thinking of Miriam, had he found it difficult to tell her? Laura could almost hear him explain, "It was a crazy thing, Miriam. I suppose I was trying to forget you. I picked her up on the beach and, well—she is attractive. We lost our heads, just driving off like that. Now, I have a wife . . ."

Laura held his arms, refusing to believe it. She had to make him see that whatever Miriam was to him, this meant more. Kissing him again, Laura gave herself completely to Mike's embrace.

"Laura?" Mother called from downstairs. "I need your help a minute, as soon as you get Mr. McLane settled."

Mike let her go. "Better run along. I'll try to remember we're just friends."

Paul didn't come with the others. Maybe he understood at last. As the parlor filled with the neighbors Mother had invited to drop in and help trim the tree, Laura gradually relaxed in the knowledge that Paul wouldn't be there.

THERE were cookies and wine and laughter, but she and Mike managed to get off by themselves in the corner beside the fireplace after the ornaments had been hung. The lights were dimmed so there was only the glow of the colored bulbs on the branches, the shimmering reflection of them in the tinsel.

"It means a lot to you, doesn't it?" Mike said. "Being home."

Smiling, Laura tucked her hand under his arm. "I'll like New York, too. With you, Mike."

"Will you?" He touched her shoulders, looking down at her a minute.

Did he think she was a country girl who would never belong to the city the way Miriam did? Miriam and his friends had shown him the contrast last night at his apartment—their talk and their sophistication against this parlor gathering around a Christmas tree.

"Laura." Mother came over. "Have you any idea what's keeping Paul? I thought he'd be here by now. His aunt wanted him to pick up the fruit cake I have for her, but Fred and Nora are going past that way, if you think Paul is working late. Didn't he say when you saw him last night?"

"Paul would have no reason to tell me what he intended to do." Laura met her mother's glance directly. "We hardly spoke to each other."

"Well, then, I'd better have Fred take it. But Laura, I wish you'd see what's happened to your father. He went out back, I think. Some of the folks are leaving."

Laura pressed her hands flat to her sides. "Yes, Mother."

When they were alone again, Mike asked, "He's the one? Paul?"

She looked around, frowning. "What do you mean, Mike?"

"Your mother was telling me while you were changing for dinner," he said. "She was so glad you managed to have a little fun in Florida, because you had run off all upset over a silly row with some fellow you were engaged to. She let you go to

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get it out of your system, but she knew you'd come to your senses. Everything was going to be all right, thank goodness, now that you were home where you belong."

"Oh, no!" Laura held his arms, shaking her head. "I used to go with Paul, but—"

"You didn't let anybody know we were married because you wished you weren't."

"Mike!"

The room hushed and Laura felt everybody turning to stare at them. She couldn't shout as loudly that he was wrong, so terribly wrong. Her heart couldn't argue her love for all of them to hear.

Laura crossed quickly to the stairs. Her eyes were shut as she climbed them. It hadn't been any use. If Mike didn't love her, all the lies and pretense wouldn't convince him. He was the one who wished they weren't married. Mike had come to her because he had no choice. He had been ready to accept every excuse that might keep it from being a marriage, hoping to end it because he loved Miriam.

She had lost, and she might as well tell Mike he was free. Crying, Laura pushed open the door of her room. She threw herself across the bed, sobbing so her whole body shook with it.

But tears gave her no relief. Lying there with her face to the pillow crushed beneath it, left with only this cried-out emptiness of longing, she dimly heard the last of the cars in the driveway and the house became quiet.

SHE HEARD footsteps on the stairs as Mother or Dad came to bed. Laura wondered if Mike had already gone to his room, perhaps pausing a moment outside her door, but not knocking or asking to speak to her—because what was dead could well wait until morning, when his bags were packed so he could leave without the hysterics he might provoke.

Mike probably would suggest an annulment, not knowing it wasn't needed. He would say he could arrange it quietly, with no reason for her friends to guess at their wild mistake. He would be sorry, of course, but comforted somewhat in not wanting to hurt her by the belief that Laura still had Paul.

She wouldn't let Mike say any of that. Laura could spare herself the torture of hearing his calmly reasoned explanations. Simply and honestly, she would confess the truth. He wasn't bound to her; Mike owed her nothing, not even his regrets.

There was a light tap on her door. For an instant Laura's heart quickened. Sitting up, she gripped the bedpost with both hands and the whisper was dry in her throat. "Yes?"

It wasn't Mike. Her mother asked, "Are you all right, Laura?" The knob turned. "What happened downstairs?"

"I had a splitting headache." Without really looking, Laura saw her in the doorway. Her mother knew. "I decided to come up. But it's all right now."

"Maybe some hot milk or a cup of tea?"

"No, please."

"Well, get to sleep, Laura. Rest is what you need. I'm sure you'll feel better in the morning." She came over and kissed her cheek lightly.

Mother meant to do what she thought was right for her. She wanted Laura to be happy. It was only that she couldn't understand. As if Laura could sleep, as though she would care when morning came, Christmas morning or any day after Mike had gone. Laura managed to force a brief smile. "Good night, mother."

She didn't undress. With the light off, so as not to worry them in seeing it was still burning, Laura went to the window. She stood staring out at the snow-frozen land, colder still with the moonlight upon it and the trees gaunt in the wind that moved their barren branches like suppliant arms. The twisted oak, alone by the barn, was an old woman forever bowed and

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This Way to Heaven

By HELEN AHERN

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♥

. . . . and Teresa hoped it was a one-way trip with Kent!

THE TOWERS of Rockefeller Center were blackening against the evening sky, as office after office closed and flickered into darkness. The floodlights in the Mall had been turned on and, without moving from her desk, Teresa could see the giant Christmas tree far below. She gazed at it with a sense of loss.

It was the last Friday before Christ-

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mas. Tonight, she and Kent Hamilton would lock the office of Santa Claus & Associates for the year. A vast number of children had been made happy, and their work was done. Their close association of the past six weeks was over.

She would see him in the downtown offices of Hamilton Aircraft, but it would not be the same. They would be Mr. Hamilton and Miss Allender to each other, instead of Kent and Teresa. Kent Hamilton, president and chief designer of his own highly successful aircraft factory —a dynamo by day, a playboy by night— had been a fabulous figure to her.

It was not until Kent had assumed the chairmanship of Santa Claus & Associates that Teresa had seen the human, appealing side of him. She had had to admit his attractiveness, but reading about his escapades and, as his secretary, checking his careless, selfish expenditures, she had thoroughly disapproved of him. More than once, Teresa had thanked her stars that the world held solid dependable young men like Pete Lawrence.

SHE glanced at her watch. It was almost six o'clock. She had a date to meet Pete downstairs at six-thirty. Teresa opened the top drawer of her desk to take a quick look at herself.

She was a slim girl, with a triangular, piquant face, shining, almost straight dark gold hair, and pansy-brown eyes. Today she had worn a jacketed dress of brown velvet, the shade of her eyes. Beneath the jacket was an exciting, bare-shouldered evening gown that, thinking about, caused Teresa to make a little face at herself in the mirror.

It was unlikely that she would remove the jacket. Pete had neither the income nor the inclination for dining and dancing in spots where bare-shouldered gowns were worn.

Hearing Kent's quick step in the corridor outside, Teresa put the mirror back in the drawer, but not before he had opened the door and seen her. He grinned teasingly.

"You found out, I hope," he said, "that you're looking pretty special today."

Teresa flushed and laughed. "Thank you, kind sir." Then, quickly, to hide the delightful shiver that had run over at the friendly admiration in his words and his look, she said, "I've sent the last of today's letters over to the warehouse, classified."

"You've done a good job around here, Teresa," Kent said, and added, "I'm going to miss all this. Aren't you?"

"It's been fun." Her voice was a little unsteady.

He had crossed to perch on one corner of her desk, and she discovered again— it always seemed like the first time—how tall he was, how broad-shouldered, how clear and steady the blue-black of his eyes appeared under the unruly blackness of his turbulent hair.

"Are you sure," she asked, "that you don't want me to come in tomorrow to take care of anything unexpected that may come up?"

"No." He shook his black head emphatically. "We have given plenty of notice to the kiddies who want dolls or sleds or what-have-you that letters had to be in by today. We'll need tomorrow, both of us, to get ready for our own Christmases." He paused. "And that reminds me—did Crystal's ring come back?"

Teresa's racing heart slowed to a dull hurting beat.

He was engaged to Crystal Moore. Just two weeks ago he had given her his ring, a lovely heirloom that had belonged to his mother. Crystal had not, however, liked the setting. She had asked him, for her Christmas present, to have it changed into a more modern style.

Teresa took a slightly malicious pleasure in reporting to him that the jeweler

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had made no delivery, and that it was probably too late to expect a delivery now.

Kent frowned faintly. "I'll have to go around and pick it up in the morning. Crystal will want to wear it over Christmas."

"Who wouldn't?" Teresa said. "It was a lovely thing. I hope you didn't change it too much."

"I changed it hardly at all." He grinned ruefully. "Not nearly enough, I'm afraid, to please Crystal. But I'm giving her a bracelet that I hope will make up for any disappointment she feels in the ring."

"How nice!" murmured Teresa with a touch of acidity that she could not control. Both an engagement ring and a bracelet for Christmas seemed just too much.

Kent looked at her curiously. "What do you want for Christmas, Teresa? What did you ask for in your letter to Santa Claus?"

"I didn't write one," she said stiffly.

"Then let's write one now."

He reached for a sheet of paper and pencil and, leaning across the desk, began to write. "We'll call it Teresa's list for Santa Claus," he said and wrote it down. "What shall we begin with?" he asked, and, when she shook her head, "How about a mink coat?"

"No, a sable!" she said. She had seen the bill for a mink coat that he had bought for Crystal.

"And, of course," he went on, writing, "you'll want a shiny new convertible."

"I suppose so."

HE WAS thinking of Crystal Moore and making no attempt to hide it. A big convertible had been another of his gifts to her. He had explained a little sheepishly to Teresa, when she turned the various bills over to him, that he was angeling the show that starred Crystal and that it was only good business to give her an impressive background for it.

But, thought Teresa, the background need not have included an engagement ring. Having made Crystal Broadway's latest and most talked-of favorite, Kent had fallen in love with his own creation.

Kent went on: "Perhaps a pearl necklace?"

The silly game began to make Teresa feel physically ill. Reaching out, she snatched the paper away from him.

"I have a date and must fix my face," she said.

"With your lawyer friend, Lawrence?"

She nodded. Kent had met Pete Lawrence on one of the occasions when he called at the office for her.

"A nice chap," observed Kent, swinging his long legs off her desk. "Wish him a Merry Christmas for me. And here's one for yourself . . . a very merry one, Teresa."

He came around the desk, hand extended, and she had no choice but to give her slim fingers to his warm grip. Smiling down at her, he pulled her to her feet.

Teresa forced a smile for him and started to say. "Merry. . . ." But she had no chance to finish.

Abruptly, Kent brushed aside her offered hand and took her in his arms. He kissed her squarely on the mouth, and she felt the sweetness of his lips. Something within Teresa seemed to let go and she kissed him back. Mad, uncounted moments went by before she came to her senses and stepped away from him.

Reluctantly she brought her eyes to his and managed to bring out a rather breathless, "Merry Christmas, Kent."

Looking a little confused himself, Kent picked up his hat and adjusted his muffler inside his overcoat. "Riding down with me?" he asked.

Teresa shook her head. She needed a few minutes alone to quiet the crazy throbbing of her pulses. "It isn't quite time to meet Pete," she said.

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Kent lifted a hand in salute and walked to the door, where he turned and wished her again a Merry Christmas. Then, struck by a last minute thought, he said, "Oh, by the way, if Crystal's ring should happen to be delivered while you're still here, put it in the safe, will you, please? And give me a ring later, like an angel, at the Hullabaloo Club? I have a reservation there at eleven."

The door closed upon him, leaving Teresa torn between fierce anger and despair. It had been needlessly cruel to have reminded her of the ring, right on top of his kiss. She hated him, and yet wanted him with her every fiber. Blinking tears from her eyes, she looked down at "Teresa's list for Santa Claus." How little he knew of her wants! Teresa caught up the pencil that he had dropped and scribbled defiantly at the top of his foolish list:

Kent Hamilton, his ring, and more of his kisses.

She wrote her name blackly at the bottom and then, snapping the pencil in two, hurled it across the room.

The small wooden fragments sailed past the head of a uniformed messenger who opened the door at the same moment. Looking startled and somewhat alarmed, he announced that he was from the jewelry firm that Kent Hamilton patronized. He had brought Crystal's ring and, after verifying that it was safely inside the monogrammed package, Teresa signed for it. The messenger went off whistling, leaving her to stare unhappily at the huge diamond which blinked whitely in a frame of emeralds.

KENT, she noticed, had changed the old-fashioned setting very little. He had hardly changed it at all. Crystal would be disappointed—Crystal would be furious, thought Teresa. She had seen her once on the stage and twice in the office, and it had not been hard to deduce that Crystal was a girl who liked her own way and usually got it. She was blonde and beautiful, but as cool and brittle as her name.

Teresa took the ring from its satin case like a person hypnotized. Slowly, deliberately, she slipped it on her ring finger. It fitted so snugly that she was certain some forgotten craftsman had made it especially for her. She would never need a guard ring.

The telephone rang almost in her ear and brought Teresa out of a world of dreams with a jolt.

It was Pete Lawrence, who did not like to be kept waiting, declaring aggrievedly that he had been waiting in the cocktail lounge for fifteen minutes.

"Sorry! I'll be right down," said Teresa. "I have nothing to do but put on my hat and coat." And to take off Crystal Moore's ring!

Teresa hung up and pulled at the ring which, unexpectedly and alarmingly, resisted her. She tugged, but the more she tugged the more the ring seemed to acquire a will of its own. She took a calming breath and realized that she was only irritating and inflaming her knuckle. Soaping was what her finger needed.

She hurried into the office's small stock room, where there was a wash basin. She applied soap to her knuckle, to the ring, to her whole hand, and pulled some more. The ring remained stubborn. Exasperatedly, she heard the telephone ring once more.

Pete Lawrence's voice crackled with impatience in her ear. "Teresa, I've now waited half an hour. Quit puttering around up there and come down, or I'll come up and get you."

Teresa knew that he was as good as his word. There was nothing to do but go down wearing the ring, and wait for a better opportunity to remove it. She put on her jacket of pale beige caracul and festive little dinner hat of brown velvet, swathed in veiling. Then, carefully, she

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reversed the ring on her finger and covered it with a brown suede gauntlet. If she had to take off her left glove, as she probably would, she could try to conceal it.

PETE LAWRENCE sat at a wall table in the cocktail bar, forty-three stories below. He stood up grumpily when Teresa hurried in. He was lankily built, with fair smooth hair and a square face.

"It is now," he said, "five minutes after seven."

Pete could time himself and other people without even looking at a clock or watch. It was one of his most annoying habits, but one of many that she, Teresa told herself, should be used to.

Pete and she came from the same upstate town and had gone together since their high-school days. He might be irritating, but he was familiar and comfortable as an old shoe. She was fond of him and might some day marry him. He was the kind of young man who would make a good husband. He had already achieved a small success in New York as a patent attorney. He would never have the kind of success that Kent Hamilton, only two years older, had. But Kent had started with a small inherited fortune. It was unfair to compare him to Pete. Sitting down, Teresa resolved to think no more of Kent. She gave her attention to putting Pete back into good humor.

"Aren't you going to wish me a Merry Christmas?" she asked lightly.

"Why?" Pete's expression was blank. "It won't be Christmas until Monday."

The remark was so typically Pete that she had to laugh and, forgetfully, began to pull off her gloves. The left one caught before she remembered wearing the ring that did not belong to her. Guiltily, she put her hand under the table. She could feel him giving her a critical survey.

"Aren't you having a drink?" he said suddenly. He pointed to the Jack Rose before her, which had arrived without her seeing it come—all selected, ordered, and delivered without so much as her by-your-leave. He stirred impatiently on his stool.

With resignation, Teresa accepted his fretfulness as an indication that she was not even going to be asked if she would have a second drink. That was Pete. Of all the merry throng in that red and green festooned room, only he appeared to feel none of the gayety and warmth that should accompany anticipation of the approaching holiday. Then she flushed, ashamed of herself. She had no right to direct such reproaches at Pete. All day long her own Christmas spirit would have done credit to old Scrooge.

"Mmm, good!" She sipped the Jack Rose and smiled at him; then was stricken afresh by conscience. "Pete, you're dressed. I mean black tie!" she cried.

"I've been wondering when you'd get around to taking a real look at me," he said. "What's so strange about my putting on a tux? You told me that you'd be wearing a new dress that was crying to go dancing, so I thought I'd surprise you by taking you."

"Oh, Pete . . ." Teresa put a penitent hand—her right one—on his arm. Then, with a show of excitement, she demanded, "Tell me about it. Where are we going?"

Pete outlined his plans with customary exactitude. They would dine at an Italian restaurant where the food was good and not too expensive, and spend a couple of hours after dinner at a movie.

"Then you and I are going places." He paused for effect. "We're going to the Hullabaloo Club."

Teresa gasped. "The Hullabaloo Club?" That was where Kent had told her to call him. She couldn't go there, wearing his immovable ring.

"I thought you'd get a kick out of it." Pete smiled for the first time that evening. He was pleased to see her properly impressed.

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"I am—I am," said Teresa. He would never know just what kind of kick she was getting. "But why the Hullabaloo Club? There are lots of other places. And, while the Hullabaloo is supposed to be the newest and smartest."

"That's why we're going there," he told her. Then, irritably, he wanted to know what ailed her. "For weeks you've been talking about the Hullabaloo and how your boss and his girl friend go there practically every night. Don't you want to meet your boss with me? Are you ashamed of me?"

"Pete, you know better than that," she said hotly. "It's just that it's so expensive."

Indignation ebbed out of Teresa with the weak excuse. Pete smiled again complacently.

"I've made reservations for us at the Hullabaloo. To heck with the expense!" His tone was lordly. "I won't have to worry too much about expense, after the first of the year," he said, and explained that he had been given a half promise of being taken into the firm he worked for. "How's that sound to you, baby? This is my big break."

"Wonderful, Pete. "Wonderful!" Teresa congratulated him sincerely, wondering what other excuse she could find for ducking, and, found immediately that there was none to which Pete would listen.

He went on, "So we go to the Hullabaloo. Stop worrying. Among other things, I was told by my boss that if I'm to be a partner in the firm, I must live and act more like a partner. Showing up now and then at a swank night spot is really good business."

She might have known, thought Teresa, that there was sensible purpose behind his determination to go to the Hullabaloo. Business! She sighed despairingly. There was no escape from an encounter that night with Kent Hamilton and Crystal, and Teresa would be wearing his ring. Crystal's ring!

Teresa's only consoling thought was that Kent and Crystal would be absorbed in each other. Probably no more than hellos would be exchanged between them and his secretary and her boy friend.

TERESA clung to that hope all during a dinner that she had to choke down and a motion picture thriller that she only pretended to watch. Riding uptown with Pete to the club, she shivered so violently that he noticed and complained.

"You can't be that cold," he said crossly. "This cab is almost too warm. You're not getting sick, I hope."

Teresa assured him truthfully that she was merely excited, and he was happy and proud. Strutting a little, he led her into the Hullabaloo Club. She waited with trembling knees while he checked his coat and hat. He came back to her and took her arm.

"You'll get used to places like this after a time, my dear," he assured her, becoming yet more proud as, at the mention of his reservation, the velvet rope across the entrance to the club proper was immediately lifted.

The Hullabaloo floor show was just concluding. Through semi-darkness, the headwaiter conducted them to one of the least desirable tables in a far corner of the crowded room. Teresa took new hope. It was possible that Kent might not ever become aware of their presence in the club.

"Let's order a drink and dance while we're waiting," suggested Pete, as he helped her off with her coat and the velvet jacket that concealed her haltered dress. As her lovely shoulders were exposed, he whistled under his breath. "Sharp," he said. "Very sharp!"

He was becoming more and more pleased with himself and, correspondingly, pleased with her. Teresa would not

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have had the heart to refuse to go out on the floor with him, even if she could have thought of an excuse.

The band gave forth with a rhumba and, their drinks ordered, they joined the couples that were leaving their tables to dance. Pete took her competently in his arms. Like many lanky, awkward-appearing men, he was an excellent dancer. Beginning to enjoy the rhumba, Teresa failed to observe that he pursued a purposeful course across the floor and then began dancing her up and down in front of the table on one side.

"Teresa!" called a man's voice from one of the tables. Her step faltered and she stumbled. She recognized that voice.

PETE stopped dancing and turned her around so that, a beat of the heart later, she was facing Kent Hamilton. Kent had risen, smiling, and was beckoning them to the ringside table where he sat with Crystal and a pudgy, balding man whom Teresa did not know. Feeling like a puppy being unwillingly lead-trained, she let Pete draw her forward.

"Teresa, this is a pleasant surprise. How are you, Lawrence?" Kent Hamilton was dismayingly cordial. He invited her and Pete to sit down and, paying no attention to Teresa's murmur about not wanting to crowd them, he motioned to a waiter to bring up two more chairs. He went on, while Pete seated her with alacrity. "Crystal, you've met Teresa."

Crystal said that it was very nice to see Miss Allender again, making it sound as if nothing pleased her less. Pete was presented to her, and she gave him a fair smile. Teresa doubted if Crystal would ever snub any man, but it was impossible to deny her beauty. She was tall and slender with hair of spun gold and long, cool green eyes. In a slim-skirted dress of ice-white satin, she looked like a stylized angel off a very modern Christmas tree.

The pudgy, balding man was introduced as Mitch Holburn. Teresa recognized the name and placed him as Crystal's newly acquired press agent. Kent ordered fresh drinks for them all, after asking Teresa what was her poison.

Pete answered for her. "She drinks Jack Roses. We have some waiting for us at our table, I believe."

Kent cocked a mischievous eyebrow at Teresa and said, "Let 'em wait. You're in my party now."

Teresa began to feel as if she were living in a nightmare. She was painfully conscious of her wrist-length gloves which she had worn out on the dance floor. She dared not take them off, although Crystal's lovely slim hands and arms were bare, as were the arms of most of the women. What few gloves were in evidence were shoulder-length and matched dresses.

The drinks came, and Kent waited until they were halfway or partially consumed. Then, leaning across the table, he said smilingly to Pete, "Crystal and I've already had a couple of dances. How about giving her a break, while I step on Teresa's feet?"

With a quick, "Delighted!" Pete turned to Crystal, while Kent rose to draw Teresa to her feet. With a prayer that she might faint and have to be carried out of the club, she let him lead her out on the floor. Then, for a second time that day, she was in his arms and, for a little while, music and motion shut out the world. Kent was an excellent dancer and she had never been able to follow anyone as easily.

"Why haven't you and I," he asked softly, his cheek against her hair, "been dancing together every night, all these last weeks and months?"

Teresa tipped back her head and looked at him with level, pansy brown eyes. "Haven't you had other commitments?" she asked.

Color stained his lean cheeks at the direct question. He countered, "How about you?"

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Teresa did not answer and, without further conversation, they went back to the ringside table when the dance ended.

"Pete and I should really go to our own table, Kent." Teresa made another desperate effort to break up the party. "I left my jacket and my bag there."

"We'll have them brought over right away," Kent said, and again summoned a waiter and gave him instructions to get anything that the lady had left at Mr. Lawrence's table.

Pete seized advantage of the brief distraction to bend close to Teresa. "Listen, baby, why don't you take off those gloves? You looked silly as the devil dancing in them. And Crystal noticed and wondered. She thinks that maybe you have to wear them on account of your fingernails being broken and dirty from typing."

Teresa smiled thinly. That was the kind of remark she would have expected from Crystal. "Possibly she's right," she told Pete. "My hands may be filthy. I'd better go in and take a look at them in the dressing room before I start exposing them to the public eye."

Pete tried to protest that, he had been joking, but Teresa rose firmly and left, with a smile of apology for the table as a whole. In the dressing room, she would make another attempt to soap off the ring that began to feel as heavy as a chunk of the Rock of Gibraltar, on her slim finger. The maid in charge, she thought, might be able to help her.

THE ladies' dressing room was, at the moment, unoccupied. The middle-aged maid accompanied her, without being called, and watched the soaping process with interest.

"That's not the way to take off a ring," she volunteered at length. "Anyhow, not the best way. You use a thread, slide it under, wind it 'round and 'round, and pull."

"Of course!" Teresa cried, with a wide-eyed recollection of once, at the age of ten, having a curtain ring she had crowded upon her finger removed in such fashion.

"I could get you some thread," said the maid. "But why should you want to take off a ring like that. It's beautiful." Taking Teresa's hand, she held it up to the light so that every facet of the diamond sparkled bluely and the emeralds sent forth green fire. Then turning to someone who had come up behind them, she asked, "Isn't it a beautiful ring?"

A little scream was Teresa's first intimation of the identity of the newcomer. She whirled, to find herself staring into the incredulous, angry face of Crystal Moore. Neither spoke for a long moment. Teresa was too scared and stricken for words. Crystal could bring forth nothing but an incoherent sputter. When she did manage a voice, it was that of a fishwife.

"You little thief! What are you doing with my ring? Where did you steal it? When? Take it off this minute, or I'll have you arrested."

The maid edged toward the door. "If there's been stealing go on around here, I'd better call the manager."

Teresa saw herself being disgraced publicly, and roused from her stupor of shock and misery. "Please!" she begged. "Let me go back to our table with this lady. The man who really owns the ring, Mr. Kent Hamilton, is there. I'll explain to him, or try to, that I only slipped on the ring this afternoon in his office, and now can't get it off. He may be angry, but I'm sure he won't want a scene made." Then, turning to Crystal, she asked, "Do you think he would?"

"Kent doesn't know you're wearing my ring?" she demanded, and when Teresa shook her head, decided, "Okay! But you're going to have to do some tall explaining, Miss Allender."

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Teresa groaned within herself, and made no denial. All the way back to the table, she said nothing while Crystal talked continuously and viciously.

"Kent," she said, "is going to be awfully angry. And I'll bet that stiff-necked boy friend of yours, unless he's in on the steal, isn't going to like it very well. And now let's get it over with!"

They had reached the table, where Kent, Pete, and Mitch Holburn were talking idly and without much interest in one another. They looked up surprised, as Crystal, gripping Teresa's hand, slammed it down on the table in front of them. The ring winked at them brilliantly.

"Kent, what do you know about this?" Crystal addressed herself to him dramatically. "Where'd did this girl get my ring? You didn't give it to her?"

Kent looked quietly at Teresa, his own eyes unreadable, before he said quietly, "Crystal, I don't know what you're talking about."

"You didn't give it to her, then!" Crystal's voice rose in malicious triumph. "She stole it. She stole my ring! She's just what I called her—a little thief!"

"Cut out the racket, Crystal!" The harsh, calming admonishment came, unexpectedly, from Mitch Holburn. "Remember there are people listening, maybe reporters."

His warning had its effect upon Crystal. She managed to lower her voice, although temper and venom continued to boil within. Swinging upon Pete, she asked in a fierce whisper, "What do you know about this? Did you help your girl steal my ring—or borrow it, as she says?"

"Please, Miss Moore!" Pete was sitting up, white and shocked. "I never borrowed or helped steal anything. How Teresa got a ring like that I don't know. I'm sure she never owned one so expensive. I know that any ring I might have contemplated giving her would have been a much more modest one. I can only apoligize to you and Mr. Hamilton if Teresa borrowed—I'm sure she didn't mean to steal—your lovely ring."

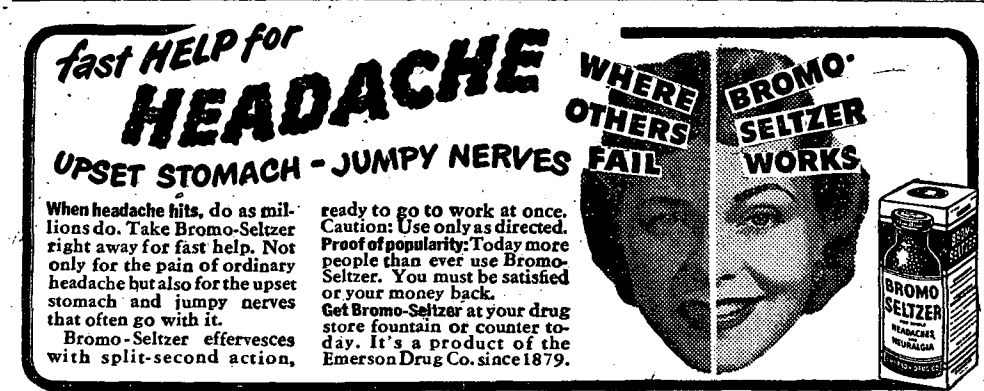
TERESA heard through his long disavowal fighting tears. As from a long distance, she heard Kent's judicial voice.

"Crystal, how can you be so sure that it's your ring?"

"As if I wouldn't recognize that old-fashioned hunk of jewelry anywhere!" she said contemptuously. "You should have known that it's not what I want, but I don't want it on that girl's finger, either. Tell her to take it off."

"How about it, Teresa?" he said. "Haven't you anything to say?"

There was a note of raillery in his voice that somehow hurt worse than Crystal's accusations or Pete Lawrence's betrayal. The tears became a choking lump in Teresa's throat.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"You know it's your ring—or hers," she said thickly. "I couldn't get it off. But I will, and I'll leave it in the office safe tonight. I'll do it now!"

Her coat, jacket, and handbag, had been brought to the table. In one swift movement, she swooped them up. Ignoring Kent's call to wait, she fairly flew from the room. He might call the police to stop her, but she had gone beyond the point of caring.

Late merrymakers were alighting from a cab as she reached the sidewalk. In a flash Teresa was inside the taxi, had given directions to the driver, and was off before an obsequious doorman had even pocketed his tip from the newcomers.

The one thing uppermost in her mind was to get back to the office of Santa Claus & Associates and put the ring into the safe where it should have been reposing. She had a sewing box in her desk, and with some thread she might be able to remove the ring. Old-fashioned remedies usually work.

Choristers were singing carols around Rockefeller Center's huge Christmas tree as she streaked down the Mall. Teresa heard them dully. They were not caroling for her.

Tears of humiliation smarting under her eyelids, she scarcely acknowledged the greeting of the night elevator operator who took her up. With shaking fingers, she put her key in the lock of the office door, let herself in, and turned on the lights.

Someone had been there before her. For frantic minutes she searched for the jeweler's box that had held the ring. It was nowhere. Its outer wrappings were in the waste basket. The previous caller must have been the cleaning woman who had taken the little box, thinking it unwanted.

Seated at her desk, Teresa rummaged through her sewing box and came out with a spool of strong button thread. Following an almost forgotten childhood memory, instead of the dressing room maid's sketchy directions, she painstakingly wound the thread, as evenly and tightly as it had been on the spool, around her knuckle, below the knuckle, above the knuckle. The finger tip throbbed with pain, and its tip turned from blue to purple to black, but, gritting her teeth, encrossed in her task, she continued. That ring was coming off, she had decided, if the finger dropped off with it!

"What on earth are you doing?" asked a voice with a remembered note of raillery in it.

Teresa's head turned, and she looked straight into Kent Hamilton's blue-black eyes, curious and amused upon her. He dropped his hat on her desk and bent closer.

"What do you want?" she demanded. "Were you afraid I wouldn't come here?"

His intrusion was the final humiliation. In a frenzy of angry shame, Teresa began rapidly to unwind the thread. The knuckle came to life, streaked with an inflamed red and a bloodless white. With her right hand she tore at the ring. It was to no avail.

TERESA'S head dropped to the desk, hiding her face and the tears that she could not control. She sobbed hysterically and fought against Kent's hands that tried to lift her face. He lifted her at length bodily, and held her in his arms.

"Teresa!" His voice was coaxing, gentle. "Stop torturing yourself. If you dislike the ring that much, we can have the jeweler file it off."

"I'm sorry!" She leaned back against his embrace. "I'll manage. I'll get it off somehow in time for you to give it to Crystal for Christmas."

Kent became very serious. "Weren't you listening tonight?" he asked. "I don't think Crystal wants the ring. And I don't want to give it to her. You keep it,

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Teresa, as my Christmas present to you."

She ventured a look at his face. There was no smile twisting his mouth, no laughter in his eyes. He meant what he was saying.

"But I couldn't take it," she cried.

"Why not? I already have a Christmas present from you," he said. "The nicest present I ever received."

Wonderingly, Teresa watched him reach into a pocket and bring from it, the missing ring box. He opened it slowly and brought out a paper, folded. She gasped, color flaming to her face. It was the scribbled note to Santa Claus, with her addition to the list of wants: *Kent Hamilton, his ring, more of his kisses.* In her distress over the immovable ring, Teresa had forgotten that revealing note.

Kent, she thought, was being unbearably cruel, making fun of her. Because of the embarrassment he was inflicting, a measure of composure returned to her.

"It was silly of me to write that," she said. "I know you belong to Crystal, just as the ring does, and I'll have it back to you in the morning. Please believe me."

He smiled. "But, darling, how can I believe you when you're all twisted? I have suspected for some time—I knew for sure when I read what you'd written—that you were my girl, not Crystal. I would have told you up at the Hullabaloo, but I had to straighten Crystal out first."

"Kent, what are you saying?" Wild joy struggled with incredulity in her brown eyes.

"Darling, darling!" He drew her back to him tenderly. "I'm just trying to say that the man goes with the ring, if you'll take him. Will you, Teresa?"

"Kent. . . ."

His answer was in her arms that went around his neck and her lips that lifted to his. She clung to him while he kissed her.

And Teresa became aware of caroling voices far, far below, in the Mall, and they were caroling for her—for Kent and her.

Love and Beauty

Love and Beauty are of one mother.
Each is twin sister to the other.
They seem to live with hearts a-tether.
We always meet them first together.

But these poor sisters are ill-fated,
For they are not forever mated.
Beauty dies young in all its glory,
While Love lives on till age is hoary.

—Clarence Edwin Flynn

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ADELE BRIDGES looked at the young man behind the single-pedestal desk in the small office with its one window framing a close-up view of the midtown skyline. Then she glanced back at the door through which she had come, almost wondering if she had read the lettering wrong. She had expected someone old and gray and soured.

This young man was handsome, dark, with strongly modeled features and a wide quick smile and an air of quiet confidence. But could he work a miracle?

"Are you Mark Patterson?" Adele asked doubtfully.

"That's right."

"You're Balanced Budgets, Incorporated."

"Right again."

"You can take somebody who's dug themselves into a financial hole and dig them out of it?"

"I'm not exactly an excavator." He grinned. "But I can usually suggest a way to rearrange expenditures to cover items not ordinarily included on any certain income."

Adele drew a deep breath, pulled down the jacket of her smart green suit, raised her firm little chin and, brown eyes looking straight into his gray ones, announced, "My items are all bills, great big bills. I have just completed a glorious summer in Europe."

Mark grinned slightly. "Sit down and give me the facts."

"They're awful," she said ruefully, sinking into the straight chair across from his at the desk. "The simple truth is that I owe five months' income. The bills are all overdue and with living costs what they are—" Her voice trailed off forlornly.

"You really dug yourself into a beaut," Mark admitted with cheerful admiration.

"I know," she said, and then added, with a burst of confidence, "Do you know I was literally crying myself to sleep every night until my friend, Lileen Cronely, told me how you fixed it so she could have that perfectly beautiful wedding?"

"She was a sentimental idiot but she wanted it so I fixed it," he said coolly.

She flushed. If he thought Lileen a sentimental idiot, he would think her a complete fool. Maybe such a fool, she wasn't worth helping. So she had better tell him the truth at once.

"Before I take any more of your time and pay you that ten dollar fee which looks awfully big to me these days," she said, "I'd better admit what happened. I fell in love."

Budget Blues

By

HOPE CAMPBELL

A girl is sure to have the blues if the man she loves budgets his kisses.

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HE SMILED again and for an instant, his eyes said things which had nothing to do with budgets. They said she was a very pretty girl. They said he had always admired smoothly shining black hair. They understood perfectly how she could fall in love and practically any man could love her.

But Mark actually said only, "I suspected that. And now you've caught him, you don't dare set a wedding date because that would mean confessing how much in debt you are? That's the usual story."

"I didn't catch him," she said bitterly and then exploded, "I chased that man all over Europe and back to New York again and I still didn't catch him."

"Oh." Mark pantomimed an amazed whistle. "Now what?"

"Now I just don't care any more," she said, blinking a mist from her brown eyes and tossing her smooth black head. "All I want is not to be driven crazy by those bills. People have been writing me nasty letters and phoning me and threatening to report me to my boss and—"

"I know, I know," Mark broke in hastily. "Don't get emotional over it."

"I'm not emotional," she said angrily. "I'm just ready to blow my top."

He shook his head discouragedly. "Begin at the beginning. That's always best."

She twisted a handkerchief between slender fingers. "All right. I met Tom Burton last spring. He's a research scientist and he'd been overworking, so he was taking a six months' leave of absence. We did all the usual things. Hack rides through Central Park. The Staten Island ferry. Dancing. Dinners at funny little places. He acted—crazy about me."

"But he didn't ask you to marry him."

"He didn't," she agreed miserably, eyes on the tortured handkerchief. "Instead he kept talking about his plans to spend the summer in Europe and it all sounded so wonderful. So I lied. I said I'd been planning to go to Europe too, had saved my money and was all ready to quit my job. I couldn't get a reservation on the same boat going over but I promised I'd see him in London. So I did quit and charged things like crazy all over town and sold everything I owned to raise cash and went to a loan shark for some more and, well, I went."

"And now you're home," Mark said factually. "How bad is it?"

"Rough," Adele said. "I'm fifteen hundred dollars in debt and I make only seventy-five a week."

"That's not a bad salary," he reproved.

She nodded. "I know. I'm an excellent legal secretary and I got a new job the instant I got home. But fifteen hundred dollars! And they all want their money right now."

"Does this fellow Tom have any idea of the jam you're in?"

Her eyes widened and darkened with horror. "Of course not," she gasped. "I couldn't tell him."

"Is he still around?"

"For another week or two, not that it means anything," she said, her voice shaking with remembered humiliation. "I went dancing with him in London. I strolled through the Bois de Boulogne with him in France. We saw the Colosseum by moonlight in Rome. I don't think New York now is going to work the miracle they couldn't. The only miracle I'm hoping for is to get out of debt."

"You literally went overboard," Mark said, grinning. "Now we'll have to see if we can't rig up a lifeline. Do you have a list of what you owe? And an estimate of your present budget? Good. Let me have them."

She dragged the typewritten lists out of her purse and averted her eyes from them as she pushed the papers across his desk. She couldn't bear to look at them. Not to mention the fact that those figures danced through her nightmares every night, every one of them clear and red and lively, wav-

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ing threatening letters under her nose and hooting at her.

Mark gave the papers a cursory summarizing glance and raised his eyebrows slightly. But he only said, "You're on your lunch hour? All right. I'll look these over this afternoon. Drop by after work and I'll give you my suggestions."

She added a ten dollar bill to the lists. "I'll be here," she promised. "Don't doubt that."

"I don't," he said, a wicked twinkle in his gray eyes as he got up to open the door for her. "I've been told more than once that, as a choice between me and the East River, my clients would take me."

She managed a slightly wavering smile. Mark was nice, she thought gratefully, while she waited for her elevator. For the first time since she got back to New York, life didn't look completely and terrifyingly grim and hopeless.

FUNNY, she thought grimly, funny-peculiar how money worries could take the black unhappiness out of a heartbreak. So much that every time one of those stinging, humiliating reminders that she owed unpaid bills came along, she could almost think of Tom impersonally for a moment. Not as the man she loved and who didn't love her. Not as the man whose deep, heartfelt kisses she longed for and who gave her only the most casual caresses. But almost hatefully, as the cause of all her troubles, with all the lost hurt yearning less in a sea of worry. The work at the office was dull and the afternoon was long. Adele typed mechanically, eyes on her watch. Five o'clock had never come so slowly. At ten to five, her typewriter was put away, she had on her hat and her eyes were fixed on the door. She never left early but at one second after five she was going to be in that hall.

Then the phone rang.

"Adele," Tom's deep vibrant voice commanded. "I had business downtown and I'm just around the corner from your building. I'll meet you and buy you a drink and if you're a very good girl, I might even take you to dinner."

Tom was that sure of her, she thought sickly. So sure he was telling her, not asking her, and didn't even bother to pretend to be making an effort for a date with her. It just happened to be convenient. But it was her own fault, Adele had to admit in all honesty. After she had chased Tom for all those tens of thousands of miles, she couldn't expect him to think he had to chase her for even one subway stop.

But for once, she could and would tell him she was busy. Somehow that shot a thrill of sheer savage satisfaction through her.

"I'm sorry, Tom," she said, not sounding contrite at all. "I'm busy. I've got to dash."

"Busy?" He sounded incredulous and then he demanded, "Doing what? With whom?"

She couldn't tell him the truth. She'd die first, she thought fiercely. Her mind fumbled and came up with a quick excuse.

"An old friend. Haven't seen him in ages. And I'm not joking. I do have to dash. Right away."

She hung up and ran for the door. She plunged into the elevator and out of it across the lobby and slammed through the revolving door. Slammed straight into the arms of a man hurrying in from the sidewalk. Straight into Tom Burton's arms.

For a moment, her heart jolted and all the old stinging sweetness swept over her. Because there was no one like Tom, no one else so tall and straight and blond, with electrically blue eyes and that quick dynamic, compelling way about him.

"What is this?" he demanded, hands

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tight on her arms. "What's this guy got that you can't break a date with him? You've always said that after all, your friends will still be left in town after I'm gone. Why doesn't it work in this case?"

She always had said exactly that and she had said it so often that now she had practically no old friends left for when after Tom went away, Adele thought grimly. But that was something else she couldn't tell him.

"Because it doesn't," she said with a defensive toss of her dark head. "Really, Tom, you did call at the very last minute and you know what it is to be tied up. It's happened to you."

Only when it happened to Tom, it was different, she realized desolately. It was all right if it happened to Tom.

"If you can't break it, can you cut it short?" he demanded.

She wavered. "I might," she admitted weakly.

"All right, then," he said masterfully and turned to the curb and signaled a taxi. "You're meeting him somewhere, I suppose? I'll take you wherever it is and give you time for a quick drink and a fast explanation. Then you break away and meet me and we'll have an evening."

Her long lashes fluttered frantically. "Fiftieth and Lexington," she muttered to gain time. "But what will you do?"

"Kill time and meet you right back there in an hour. Where are you meeting him?"

"In his office."

"It'll be like that evening in Naples," Tom promised, deeply blue eyes looking straight down into hers. "Remember?"

She nodded. She did remember. She remembered too much and too often. And this evening would be just one thing more to remember, Tom's sweetness, his impetuosity, his urgency, the deep note in his voice when he talked to her, the look in his eyes. All hold such sweet promise which always thrilled her anew. Only to twist it achingly and hopelessly later because the promise was never kept.

Someday she would get over this. Someday her foolish heart would stop hoping, she told herself fiercely. But not tonight. Not tonight. This evening would be like all the rest, filled with shimmering hope and followed by black heartbreak when it was over.

"An hour," Tom ordered as they got out of the taxi. "Not more than an hour."

"Six-thirty," Adele said and hurried into the building.

SHE PEERED back before she stepped into the elevator and her heart sank suddenly. Tom wasn't strolling off, windowshopping, killing time. He was waiting right there where the taxi had dropped them, lounging beside a bus sign, eyes on the building door. He was watching, she realized with a sense of shock, watching for her to come out with her date, waiting to see who the man was.

She caught her red underlip between white teeth to steady it. Because if Tom didn't see her leave the building, he would guess her date was a business appointment and she would be caught in the most humiliating of lies. Maybe, she thought frantically, she could say they went out another way.

Maybe she could—She pushed open the door to Mark's office and sank down in a chair, worry-clouded eyes staring at nothing, still biting her lip. Or maybe she could tell Tom.

"Do you know you've been sitting there two full minutes without saying a word?" Mark asked. "I thought you hired me to do your worrying for you."

"Oh," she gasped, staring. "Oh, I'm sorry. But you see, Tom—he's the man I told you about—called me for a last minute date and when I said I was busy, he came dashing around and insisted on bringing me right up here and now he's waiting outside. I told him I could cut

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my date short and meet him later but I never dreamed he'd snoop."

"So he called you for a casual date that suddenly became very important when you turned him down," Mark said pleasantly. "And now he's spying on the competition. Snooping and lurking, huh? Sounds like a dog-in-the-manger type who wants only what he can't have."

Hot color stained Adele's cheeks. "He is not," she cried indignantly. "It's my own fault. I've always broken dates for him."

Mark's gray eyes glinted with amusement. "Let's not argue about that. Let's just say I suspect you've been using the wrong tactics with the guy. I've got a hunch you'd get farther being chased than chasing him."

"What good does that do me now?" she asked angrily. "It's too late."

"Not at all," Mark denied coolly and stood up and slid the papers on his desk into his pocket and strode over to get his hat. "You hired me to get you out of a hole. I know how you can dig yourself out the hard way. Why not do it the easy way? Catch the guy and let him take over. After all, he's the reason you're in this jam."

She stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Catch him and then when he's crazy about you confess you can't get married because you have to work off all those debts. He'll pay up fast rather than postpone the wedding."

"What?" she cried incredulously. "Why, that's terrible. I wouldn't do a thing like that."

HE HUNCHED one shoulder slightly and opened the door. "All I can say is I advise it often and it always works. Come on."

"Come on where?"

"If your Tom is the type I think he is, competition will work some wonders that the Roman moonlight never did. Consider this just another of the unusual personal service features of my business. Nothing is too much trouble to help a client get the needed results."

"What are you going to do?" she asked uncertainly.

"Just let him see us walk out of here and go across the street together. There's a nice bar-lounge there. He'll turn pale green with jealousy and we can talk business over a Martini there. Killing the famous two birds with one Martini."

She hesitated. But it would save her endless explanations, elaborate explanations which Tom might not believe. And as Mark said, they could talk one place as well as another.

Tom was still waiting by the bus sign. Mark didn't seem to give him a glance, apparently concentrating on helping her across the street, his hand solicitously on her elbow, chatting lightly all the way.

But the instant they were seated, Mark grinned and said with satisfaction. "What a beaut of a slow burn your Tom did! I hit it the first time. This is the medicine to hand that boy."

She flushed hotly. "I think you're awful," she burst out. "Cheap and cynical and—"

"And practical," he said flatly. "Don't look now, but Tom just came in. He's taking a seat where he can watch everything we do. You can be grateful he isn't at the next table breathing down our necks."

"Why, he wouldn't do a thing like that," she cried.

Mark grinned wickedly. "Oh, no?" Then he looked into her blazing eyes and hunched his shoulders defensively. "Okay. Okay. I won't say another word about it. Let's go over what I worked out for you this afternoon, just in case the jealousy angle doesn't work. And if Tom asks you what we were talking about, and I'm dead sure he will, tell him I have

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great faith in your business judgment and I was going over a, oh, call it an advertising campaign and I wanted your opinion on it. That'll stop him."

Adele bit her lip, choking back the angry words. Mark was completely cynical, completely without any sense of ethical right and wrong. But if he could show her how to pay those debts, she could take it for an hour.

"IN THE first place," Mark said briskly, "I want you to go around to every one of your creditors and tell them the situation frankly. Not why you did it. Tell them you're making every effort to pay and will pay in full as fast as you can."

"You mean, go to all those stores?" she cried, horrified. "I can't. I'd die of humiliation, talking to all those credit managers and admitting what a fool I was and how bad it is."

"You'll die of a lot more humiliation if you don't," Mark advised callously. "If you can convince them you intend to pay, they'll be reasonable. But if they decide you're trying to beat the bills, they'll get tough. Then you'll really learn about humiliation. Among other things, they could cost you your job. Lawyers are apt to be touchy about the financial reliability of their employees."

"Oh," she breathed miserably. "But what do I tell them?"

"Tell them how much you owe. Tell them what your income is. Tell them what steps you're taking so you can pay them. Including coming to me, if you like. If they call me, I'll verify your story. You go to every one of those stores within the next week. That's step number one. Along with that, we're starting a money-saving campaign, cutting living expenses."

"That's impossible," Adele wailed. "I've got the cheapest room at the club-hotel where I live. I eat at the Automat often. I'm not buying clothes."

He held up one strong, long-fingered hand to stop her. "That's not good enough. You're going to live on twenty-five dollars a week."

"I can't do it," she gasped.

"Yes, you can," he claimed cheerfully. "You're going to move to a boarding house I know in Brooklyn. Room and board cost eighteen a week, which includes a lunch to take to work with you. You'll share a room with two other girls. I often recommend the place. The roommates will probably be some of my clients too."

"But I can't live like that," she choked. "It's absurd. I make a good salary. A place like that is for girls who have a small income."

"Baby," Mark said, grinning, "the spot you're in, you're lucky not to end up getting free board and room, courtesy of the state. Stop squawking. I've made a list of other economies here. You can study it later. It includes no beauty shops, one movie per week provided a date doesn't take you for free, no taxis, no nothing, practically. Don't forget you've had your fun and you've got to pay for it. Shouldn't take too long. If you watch your step you can pay off in about eight months."

"Eight months!" she gulped and then said bitterly, "I can understand why some of your clients would prefer the East River."

"But they never really do it." He laughed. "They just wish I were there. I've figured out just how much you're to pay each place every week and as long as you stick to that budget, you'll be all right."

She looked at him with angry eyes. She had never felt so trapped and harrassed and abused in all her life. But Mark was right. She had to do it. For eight endless months. She shuddered slightly.

"Eight months isn't forever," he consoled as if he'd read her thoughts.

"No, but something tells me it'll be

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enough to sour me on love for life," she cried. "It's enough to turn a girl into a man-hater."

"I suggested another way," Mark drawled. "Oh, oh. Your boy is headed this way. Let me handle him."

FOR A moment, Adele froze. Mark was capable of anything, she realized frantically, absolutely anything. And if she tried to stop him from doing whatever he intended, he might switch to something even worse.

Tom strolled up to their table and stopped with a simulated start of surprise. "Adele," he exclaimed. "Imagine meeting you here."

Then he looked inquiringly at Mark and somehow Adele muttered introductions. She noticed with amazement, as the two men shook hands, that Mark was the taller and broader-shouldered of the two, that Mark radiated a quiet confidence which somehow made Tom's dynamic energy seem like nervousness.

Then she saw Mark start to speak and instinctively closed her eyes. Because something told her it was going to be completely outrageous. And a cold shiver went through her as she heard the first words.

"So you're the guy who's been monopolizing Adele?" Mark said casually. "A gang of us are on the point of forming an Unfair-to-Friends-of-Adele League to haunt you out of town."

Tom looked startled for an instant and then said quickly, "But I won't be in New York much longer."

"Happily," Mark said coolly. "Some of us think you've already stayed too long. As for this song and dance Adele was trying to give me so she could get away to dinner with you, I'm not buying it. I've got a date with Adele this evening and she's keeping it. And I don't give a plugged nickel whether or not either of you like it. To corn a phrase, that's the way it is and that's the way it stays."

"That most decidedly is not the way it is if Adele doesn't like it," Tom said angrily. "She's the one to decide who she wants for a dinner date."

Mark's fingers dug into Adele's shoulder. "Tell the gentleman you're sticking to the plans we've been making for this evening," he ordered ambiguously. "Remember I want to take you out to that place in Brooklyn and it's important."

The boarding house. That horrid boarding house which only Mark knew and without which she could never stick to his budget. Blackmail, that's what it was, blackmail. She shot him one furious, accusing glance and he grinned back, completely unrepentant.

She said tightly, "I'm sorry, Tom. I did try to arrange it but this is sort of—of urgent."

"I've waited over an hour," Tom exploded. "Hung around, just waiting. And

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now you go and change your mind."

Mark put a hand under Adele's elbow, urging her to her feet. "You asked for it, chum." He grinned at Tom. "I had a date and you tried to bust it up. You've got no squawk coming. It's the other way around, in fact. It was nice seeing you but we've got to go."

Adele gave Tom one misery-laden, imploring look before Mark practically lifted her from the chair and pulled her out of the place. She went outside, very stiff, not saying a word, until Mark saw a taxi, stopped it and put her in.

THEN she turned on him, eyes blazing. "Of all the disgusting exhibitions," she cried. "I'm surprised Tom didn't slug you. I never heard anything like it. It was completely unnecessary and absolutely outrageous. What do you think you're doing?"

"I think I'm taking you to dinner." Mark grinned. "And don't try to tell me how to handle a guy like Tom. You've proved you can't do it. I know the type. He got what he's been needing for a long time. It'll do him good, besides helping you."

"Helping me? He'll probably never even call me again. What he must think! If he thinks I like people like you!"

Mark chuckled. "Go ahead," he advised unconcernedly. "Do you good to get it off your chest. But I'm not being the party of the second part to any fight. Because I don't know what's to happen. And when it does, you can come around and thank me nicely. How's about forgetting this and letting both of us enjoy dinner?"

She blinked and choked back the words, a lot of words, she had been going to throw at him. Because, she decided bitterly, this might be the last good dinner at a nice place she was going to have in quite a while and she better enjoy it.

Then all at once, as they sat across from each other at the small table in a discreetly remote corner, her mind was in a turmoil of confusion. Mark was such a contradictory personality. She had never met anyone like him. He was likeable. He inspired confidence. He was fun. Yet at the same time, he was so completely cynical and outrageous.

Very slowly, she decided that perhaps he wasn't so contradictory after all. In his business, Mark had to cut straight across ordinary solutions, taking daring short cuts. Because ordinary solutions wouldn't work for the desperate harassed people who came to him for help. To save their lives from plunging into utter financial chaos, Mark had to think and act as he did.

"Now what?" he demanded with that quick wide grin. "You've been sitting there in one of those blue studies of yours again. For about five minutes this time."

"Oh," she said with a start. "Oh, I was just thinking."

"So I observed. About Tom?"

"No," she said honestly. "About you. I guess you have to be the sort of person you are or you couldn't make a success of your kind of business."

"Baby," Mark said laughingly, but the spark in his eyes was something deeper and more thrilling than amusement, "I hate to admit it but you're on the verge of understanding me. And I think I like it."

Her breath caught and her heart jolted and missed a beat. Then she looked down at the table, long lashes fluttering. Don't be silly, she told herself vigorously. You're still in love with Tom and not yet out of the jam that landed you in. So don't be silly, Adele Bridges.

But after dinner, Mark flatly refused to take her to Brooklyn. She set her jaw and was ready to face it. Why bother, Mark decided. The easy solution was working out far too promisingly to waste time arranging the hard one. At least, for the moment.

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Instead he suggested a Broadway movie. And then a nightcap at the Astor. Finally he admitted that tomorrow was a working day.

AS THE taxi stopped and he got out with her, he grinned suddenly. She looked up at him with a startled question in her eyes. But he only put an arm around her and drew her close against his shoulder.

"Lift your face," he whispered in her ear. "And make it look good. I see a shadow lurking. Right in that doorway down there. I'm not saying it's Tom but it sure is somebody watching this place."

"But—"

Mark just closed one twinkling gray eye and put a finger under her chin and raised it. Then he kissed her, a kiss as light and twinkling as the light in his eyes. Then all at once, he pulled her to him and his lips crushed down on hers demandingly. And suddenly she felt as if she had stepped right out of that solid familiar street into an unknown world, a star-sprinkled, gold-streaked cloud of a world which floated wonderfully and beautifully clear off the earth.

When Mark let her go, she could only look at him, her face touched with radiance and yet shyly questioning. Mark only grinned in answer, patted her shoulder encouragingly and then handed her the papers from his pockets.

"Now don't worry," he said. "Everything's under control. And I do mean everything. Look these over tonight. I think they should convince you that scruples, when it comes down to dealing with a man like Tom, are a very bad idea. But if you still want to do it the hard way, I'll take you over to that place in Brooklyn after work tomorrow. No. It's no trouble. I want to see someone over there anyhow. Something tells me her budget is slipping and she's ashamed to come in and confess it. About five-thirty then? 'Night."

Adele turned, her hand on the door, but lingering, looking after Mark's taxi. Her face clouded but her mouth was soft and her eyes dreamed. A strange man, Mark, an infuriating man. A man to rage at and a man with stardust in his kisses.

"Adele."

She started and whirled, eyes dilating. Mark had been right. Tom. Tom with a dark scowl on his handsome face.

"You were lurking," she gasped. "Mark was right."

"Mark seems to be right in more ways than one," Tom growled.

She colored hotly. "That's what you get for lurking," she defended feebly. "At this hour too."

"I know what time it is," he said scornfully. "What I want to know is what happened. Who is this tough guy who seems to think he's making all the time with you all of a sudden?"

"An old friend," she said defiantly and was appalled to realize she was enjoying herself. How could she never have guessed she was so resentful toward Tom! "After all, you never had a monopoly."

Tom's strong jaw set. "I'm declaring one now. I'll pick you up at the office tomorrow and we'll talk it over."

She swallowed hard and stared at him, feeling stunned. Mark couldn't have been right about Tom. He couldn't. But the facts fairly screamed at her. At the first sign of serious competition, Tom was doing what he had never done before, doing what she had dreamed of and longed for and despaired of all these months.

SUDDENLY, given that way, almost as if Tom's hand had been forced, it seemed cheap, valueless, because it hadn't been freely given. Adele looked up into Tom's face and she saw him as if for the first time, handsome and charming and keenly intelligent. But she saw him also

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without the halo of glamour which had always misted her eyes when she looked at him before. Without that, Tom was just another man. And the knowledge shook her heart and her whole world to their very foundations.

She said slowly, as if she could hardly believe herself that she was saying it, "But I have a date with Mark."

"Break it."

"I shouldn't," she said honestly. "In fact, I can't. It's terribly important."

Important, something inside her amended, if she wanted to do things the hard way. And she was shocked afresh to realize that if Tom represented the easy way to pay those debts, she didn't want any part of it.

Tom's hands caught her wrists compellingly. "As important as the fact I'm not going to be in town much longer and we have a lot of things to settle? Things like the rest of our lives?"

"The rest of our lives." Her mouth twitched with wry sad amusement. So short a time ago her heart would have sung and danced to hear those words. Now they were only words. She said ambiguously, "I'm afraid my life for quite a few months to come is settled right down to the last minute."

"Mark?"

"Mark." And there was no point in adding but not in the way Tom thought.

"I don't get it," Tom said sharply and then his eyes narrowed. "Unless you've decided to play it coy all of a sudden. And I know the answer to that."

He started to draw her closer, to take her into his arms. Suddenly she felt black revulsion sweep all through her. She didn't want his kisses. And she was angry, coldly, furiously and resentfully angry.

"I don't play games with love," she said, her voice unsteady with that fury. "I don't decide to play it coy or not coy. In my book, that's cheap. And I don't appreciate your thinking I'd do it. I may make a fool of myself at times but I'm not cheap."

Tom's hands dropped and he looked down at her with baffled, flashing eyes. "I don't know what's happened to you," he accused angrily. "But I certainly don't like it. And I'm not going to try to talk to you in this mood. If you want to see me again, phone me."

HE TURNED and strode off down the street, his heels clicking sharply against the concrete and his tall figure gradually disappearing into the shadows. Adele stood and watched him go. Last look at Tom, she thought with strange detachment. Last look at the one folly every girl is entitled to once.

Then electrical shock shot through her. What about herself? Could she too have wanted only the unobtainable, losing all interest once she got it?

She shook her dark head in quick repudiation. No, that simply was not true. Maybe she had loved Tom too long and too hopelessly, until at last her love had simply wilted and died for lack of any response. That was it. But was that all? Her heart jolted and all at once she felt shy with herself, which was the strangest thing that had ever happened to her.

She turned, as if she could run from herself and her own shyness, and hurried up to her room and hastily got into bed, telling herself that she was merely being overly fanciful. Not because of Mark's kiss. But because she was tired. That was all. Exhaustion could cause one to have the strangest ideas which were best put away until they could be examined in bright daylight and in all hard-headed sanity.

To make sure she stayed entirely sane the next day, she saw two credit managers during her lunch hour. They were stern and grieved but they agreed they would rather be paid eventually than not at all. At five-thirty, she went up to Mark's of-

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fice. Again that strange shyness swept over her but she crushed it down and gave him an account of her two interviews.

"And Tom?" Mark asked dryly.

"He was lurking," she admitted, looking hard out the window. "We left it that I'd call him if I wanted to see him again."

Mark beamed. "I told you so."

"I loathe people who say that," she said.

"But I did," Mark claimed blandly. "I don't see why you even bothered with those credit managers because now all you've got to do is let him pursue you for a few days and then tell him the awful truth. Then heigh-ho for the scientific, debt-free life."

Adele straightened indignantly. "Look, that man's caused me enough trouble. I'm in deep enough without throwing good time and money after bad."

"Bad?" Mark asked softly.

"Every girl's entitled to one folly," she claimed defiantly. "Mine was a beaut but I'm lucky to get off this cheap. Just think how terrible it would have been if I'd married him and had to spend the rest of my life running away because that's the only way to keep him interested."

"Which brings up an interesting question. Are you interested only when you're pursuing?"

"I'm interested only when I'm in love."

The words burst out before she realized what she was saying. Then she gulped and simply stared at Mark, appalled. She hadn't meant to say that.

BUT NOW she'd done it. She looked at Mark. She looked at the nicest, most reassuring, most aggravating, most cynical man she had ever known. She looked at the man she had tumbled head over heels in love with, faster and harder than she would have believed possible.

And it wasn't a bit like what falling for Tom had been. Tom had talked about himself and Europe for half a dozen dates before they both began to sound irresistibly enticing. Besides, with Tom, she knew she had been in a mood to fall in love and so naturally she had. She had fallen in love with love.

Encounter in the Rain

The rain fell sweetly like silver lace
That curtained us off in a special place
Just big enough
For you . . .
For me . . .
And the sudden kiss
Or two . . .
Or three . . .
That we stole there, standing in shrouds of mist
While only the raindrops knew we kissed.

Everyone else was snug indoors,
Or busy about his own dull chores,
So only the rain
Saw you . . . .
Saw me . . .
And that one swift kiss
Or two . . . .
Or three . . . .

—Carol Hunt

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With Mark, she was in love with a man, with all his faults and strengths and irritating ways. And that was love. She faced the thing she had been dodging ever since the night before. This was complete and devastating love and it was for keeps, for as long as she lived.

But to Mark, she was only a client, probably the most foolish of a long list of foolish clients.

Long lashes fluttering, she tried a desperate switch of subject. "So that leaves Brooklyn," she said with forced lightness. "Hadn't we better get over there?"

"In a minute," Mark said with annoying leisureliness. "I'm strangely interested. What makes you decide so suddenly you're in love and then just as fast that you're out of love?"

"Just the way I feel," Adele muttered.

"And how do you feel?"

Adele glared at him and could only hope he would think she meant Brooklyn. "Trapped," she said angrily.

Mark's gray eyes glinted. "Odd feeling, isn't it?" he drawled. "This is the end of the trolley ride, the end of the line and from here on, you're on your own, exploring as you go."

Her breath caught and for a moment, she couldn't speak. Then she whispered, "What are you talking about?"

"The same thing you are. Love. The great adventure. Two people discovering love and life together, striking out ahead even if they're not sure where they're going except that they have to go there together. You don't like my methods, even if they work. And I always swore I'd never marry a woman who wasn't just as practical about money as I am. And here we are."

She straightened. "But all you've done since we met is push me at Tom," she cried. "So I don't know where we are."

"We're right where we've been heading ever since you walked into this office the other afternoon," Mark said firmly. "Getting more and more aware of each other, learning about each other, wanting to be with each other. Falling in love, in short. Like this."

Somehow he was out of his chair and she was out of her chair and they were in each other's arms. The golden cloud enclosed them again and all the stars danced up and down a rainbow. Her heart shook with incredulity, that this would be, so beautiful and so sudden. Yet she had to believe it. Because her heart knew that this glory was love.

Mark raised his dark head and chuckled. "I know I pushed you at Tom. I know it better than you do. I suspected what was happening to us and I did a little conniving. I know of no way to get a girl sick and tired of a man faster than to keep insisting she must marry him. So I did just that."

Adele's eyes widened. "And you threatened me with Brooklyn too. Was that part of it?"

He grinned shamelessly. "I figured once you were tired of Tom, I'd look good compared to Brooklyn. Can you blame me?"

"No," she said demurely with a mischievous smile teasing at her lips. "But what about your own advice to let the bridegroom pay the debts?"

"Balanced Budgets, Incorporated always lives up to its promises," he said solemnly and then he caught her close in his arms again and his voice deepened vibrantly, "Oh, darling, I haven't said it but you know it, don't you? I love you, I love you, I love you."

Then he caught her close and held her so tenderly, so gently and yet as if he could never let her go.

A miracle, Adele thought, her heart catching and then beginning to race. She had come here looking for a miracle. But she had not dreamed of any miracle as wonderful as the one she had found, love for always and ever.

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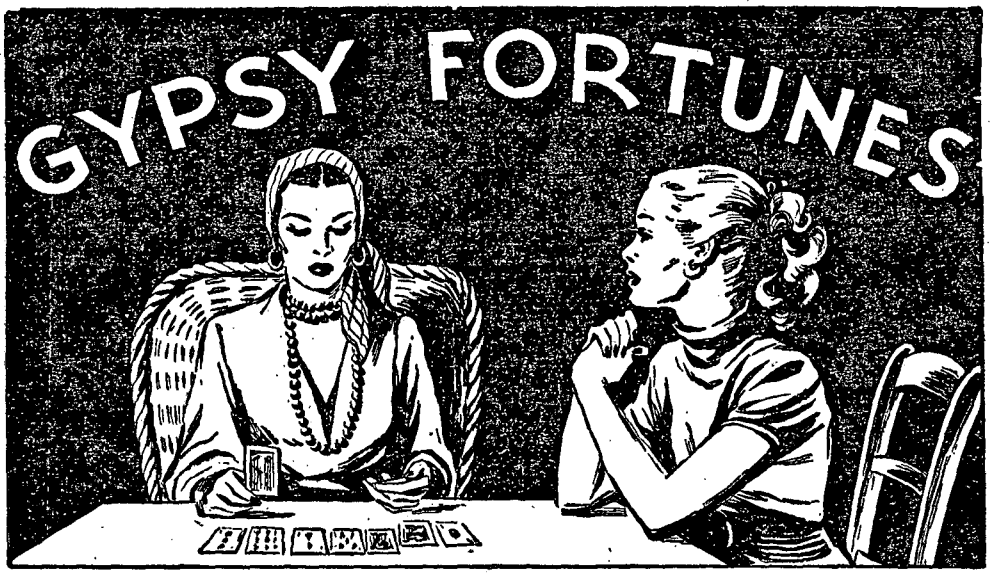


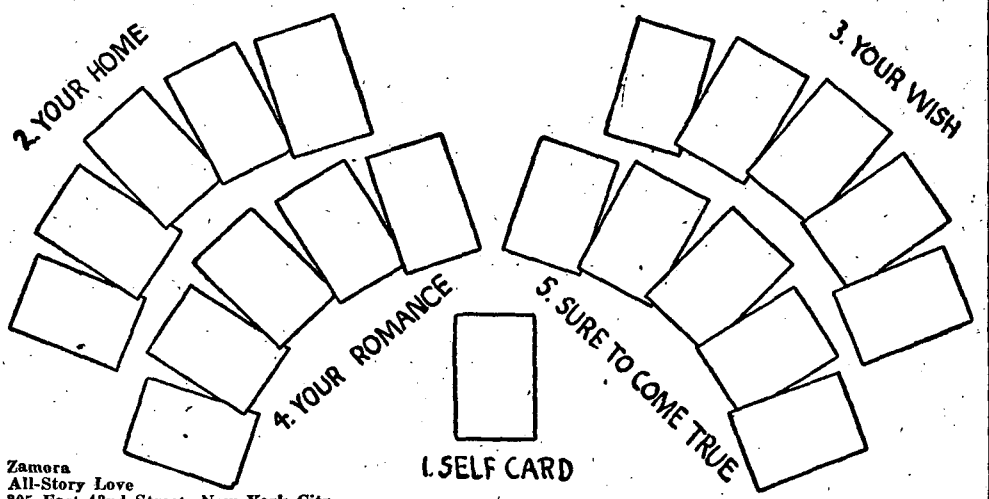
Cross Zamora's palm with silver—fifteen cents will do—and she will tell you a real gypsy fortune.

Select the card that represents you from a bridge deck: Queen of Diamonds if you are a very blonde woman; King if you are a man; Hearts if you are a medium blonde; Clubs if you are medium brunette, and Spades if you have black hair and black eyes. List that card in the space marked No. 1.

Now make a wish. Shuffle the full bridge deck with the self card withdrawn. Spread them in a horseshoe and select any twenty-one cards.

Lay them out in four piles of five cards each and you will have one card left. That is the surprise card.

Fill out the diagram and the coupon and send them with fifteen cents and a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Zamora, and in a personal letter to you, she will tell you your fortune from the cards you have laid out.



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Dear Zamora:

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STREET or BOX.....

CITY..... STATE.....

BIRTHDAY..... AGE.....

SINGLE..... MARRIED..... DIVORCED.....

12-50

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The Miracle Maker

By
FRANCIS FLICK

60-

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Dex reached across the table and grabbed Scott. "Now get out of here," he said angrily.

♥

Dex was determined to give not one girl, but two girls a merry Christmas.

DEXTER BLAKE drove his small coupe slowly through the gray stone gates of the Hayden School for Younger Girls, while the hard-packed snow crunched beneath his tires. He'd been born and raised in Laurelton, ten miles up the Connecticut Road; he'd fallen in love in Laurelton, yet this was the first time he'd ever really noticed these old gates.

The branches of the old maples bent

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low with their white thick crust of snow and their glittering icicles. As he rounded the bend, he saw great Christmas wreaths with their jaunty bows hanging in the windows of the old building. At the other side of the driveway a sleigh waited, the bells jingling as the horses tossed their heads. Dex hadn't been this close to a Christmas card scene for a long, long time.

He parked his coupe and climbed out, feeling like a fool. His lean face reddened as he took the school steps two at a time. He'd rather face a tough jury any time than this.

The note seemed to crinkle, then, in his pocket. It had arrived this morning, addressed to him at Sawyer, Sawyer, Haines and Sawyer law firm in New York. It had been brief, written in a large, round eight-year-old hand, but it had shocked him into the realization of the Yuletide and his guardianship.

"Dear Mr. Blake," it said. "I don't like to bother you, but tomorrow's Saturday and most of the girls left a week ago. I don't know if you have any plans for me over Christmas. I can go visit a friend. If I do not see you, a Merry Christmas." And it was signed, "Respectfully, your ward, Sarah Leigh."

In October, Hunt and Mary Leigh had been killed in a plane crash and Hunt's will had named Dex as Sarah's guardian, with Scott Campbell the executor of his small estate. Dex had been in Chicago on a case and hadn't received the letter from Scott until his return to New York, and by that time Sarah was back in school. Dex had written and promised he'd come up, but work had crowded and, when you're young and your name isn't even the last one on the door of a powerful and successful law firm, you keep the nose to the grinding. He'd ordered a cake and candy to be sent to her every two weeks and decided if Sarah were like he'd been in school, food was most important.

INSIDE, the halls shone with wax, and there was a faint aroma of linseed oil. The small tree on a table looked slightly droopy, as though too many little hot hands had patted it. Well, Dex thought, he felt slightly droopy himself. What did you say to a little girl of eight? What did you do with her over the holidays? Dex fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette. He didn't take it out. Hell, there was probably some law about smoking in these decorous halls.

He watched the tall, slender girl appear in the open doorway of an office, and he felt as though he'd been plunged head-first into a nine-foot snow bank. She was still just as breath-taking, this beautiful Gay Russell, and Dex' gray eyes hardened. She had the same shining black hair, cut short and curling gently around her softly modeled face; and the same deep blue eyes beneath winged brows. A lovely face. A lovely figure too, in that deftly detailed ruby-red corduroy dress that matched her lipstick.

Dex waited until she finally noticed him. He watched her stiffen and her eyes grow cold. "Well?" she said. Her voice still had that low thrilling quality that he'd loved.

"Well," he countered, "what are you doing here?"

"Secretary to the boss." She made no effort to hide her dislike.

Dex sighed. He tried on his lop-sided grin for size, and got nowhere with it. It was a good grin, asking you to frisk along and share it. Most girls did. Once, Gay had.

"Is something wrong?" he asked politely. "I mean, am I still an untouchable, or a three-toed sloth, maybe? Do you still want to ignore me?"

"You're Dexter Blake. Isn't that enough?" The words sounded like icicles snapping off a maple. "Wait in the reception room and I'll send for Sarah Leigh. She's the last one left in the school for the

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holidays, but I suppose you have come to wish her a Merry Christmas, haven't you? Even at the last minute? What made you remember her?"

"I have come to take her into New York for Christmas with me," he told her with dignity, and started stiffly toward the room she'd indicated.

"I wonder if you have any idea what it means to a sensitive little girl to lose the parents she loved?" Gay burst out at him. He whirled to face her. "To feel that you didn't belong to anyone now? To feel completely alone and unloved when she thought she was partly your little girl? Oh, yes," another icicle dropped and crackled, "you sent her ridiculously rich cakes and enough candy to make the whole school sick for two weeks until your next package. But every Saturday and Sunday, Sarah watched the gates, waiting for you to come."

"I'm a bachelor. What do I know about little girls?" he demanded fiercely. He turned on his heel and strode into the cold, austere reception room.

Dex stood at the window looking out on a white world and at the dark leaden sky. The anger was rising in him to the boiling point. Damn it, he was calm and well controlled, a man who tried to approach problems with a cool judicial eye. But Sawyer, Sawyer, Haines and Sawyer would bow their collective heads in shame if they could know how he yearned to shake sooty-haired Gay Russell until her pretty white teeth rattled.

A year ago, the way she'd acted had twisted in him like a blunt knife, but in the intervening months he'd made himself forget her—almost. They'd started to fall in love, or at least he'd been lost in the magic, when his big chance had come to join the big law firm in New York. One day he'd been preparing to try an accident case for Laurelton's drunken character; old Jake had been hit by a car driven by a college kid, the son of a friend of Mr. Sawyer's, and Dex had the case all prepared and had turned it over to Scott when he suddenly left for the big town. Gay had wanted him to stay in Laurelton, she'd made that plain enough.

She'd even made it plain that she thought he was walking out on Scott. He remembered that he'd laughed and assured her Scott was delighted to have the town practice alone. Later, when Dex had telephoned Gay and exuberantly asked her into New York for dinner she'd coldly declined and told him not to phone again. It was the royal brush-off. And he'd known then that it had only been he who'd fallen in love. It had been as simple as that.

"HELLO, Mr. Blake," a small uncertain voice said to his back. Dex turned quickly.

"Why, hello!" He put boom into it, then let his smile fade out. Sarah stood close to Gay, a too-thin little girl in a plain dark blue jumper dress and two neat chestnut braids. The braids were tied with two bright red ribbons, worn like a badge, of course. It was her dark eyes that stopped him. They were huge brown eyes, filled with hurt. There was no quick interest in them as they watched him, only that hurt and a beautiful dignity. No child of eight should possess this poise and calm passivity, this much control—or this much hurt.

He wasn't on trial with Sarah. He'd been convicted.

"I came to take you to New York with me for Christmas, Sarah," he said gently. Then he added, "If you care to come."

She hesitated almost imperceptibly. "Thank you, Mr. Blake. I'm sure it will be lovely." It was when she looked up at Gay that her voice trembled just a little. "Shall I get my bag?"

"Yes, dear." Gay touched her slim shoulder gently.

Dex wanted to call to Sarah and remind her that she used to call him Uncle Dex,

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in the days when he'd been in and out of the Leigh house. Not that he'd actually ever seen much of Sarah, since she'd usually been in bed when he came. But once he'd taken her out on an easy bobsled run, then to his house where he'd tried to make hot chocolate when they'd found Mrs. Munford, his housekeeper, was out. They'd ended up at the soda fountain in the drug store. Maybe if he mentioned it, Sarah would remember that she'd had fun that day. But he couldn't say anything. Not now.

"I wish I'd come up here sooner," Dex said quietly. If, in his stupidity, he'd brought that hurt into Sarah's eyes, he should go and quietly saw his throat. And he knew from the law that ignorance is never an excuse.

"I was going to take Sarah to Laurelton for Christmas," Gay said. Dex could picture her small cottage across the road from his house—a lovely, warm, cozy place where they'd spent so many wondrous hours, her head on his shoulder, talking and dreaming before a fire.

"Sarah was almost happy about it, since this is her first Christmas without Hunt and Mary," Gay finally said. "Then you had to suddenly arrive out of the blue. For the first time since she's been your ward, you want to drag her off to New York. Alone."

His fingers touched the note in his pocket that Sarah had written him yesterday. Perhaps she'd want to keep it a secret just between them; perhaps, she didn't want even Gay to know.

"Are you starting your vacation too?" he asked.

"Yes. This is my last day at the school." Gay drew in a long breath and smiled. It was wonderful, her smile, just as he'd never quite forgotten in all the long months. Even if he knew it had nothing to do with him. "I'm marrying your ex-partner, Scott. I'm marrying him right after the holidays, Dex."

He stared down at her and felt a band snap around his chest. He'd grown up with Scott; they'd lived next door, and after Dex's grandmother died, he'd spent more time at Scott's than in his own house. They'd gone to law school together and had started a law practice.

Scott was a big, lazy, handsome guy, but he was never meant for Gay. Maybe it was that he was too easy-going, too eager to go fishing and close up the law books. Scott had never prepared a case properly in his life, not if the fish were biting, or he could flush a covey of quail. Or maybe it was that no man was meant for Gay, no man but Dex, himself.

SHE WAS looking at him, waiting for him to say the usual conventional words of congratulation, but Dex shook his head. He couldn't when he honestly hoped she'd be miserable married to anyone else.

"I don't think you love Scott," he told her.

She laughed at him. "You *would* think that, Dex. But you're so very wrong. Scott's quite wonderful, you know. He's gentle and easy-going, a man who's not eaten rotten by personal ambition."

Dex stared down at her. Surely a man had a right to leave his own small home town to take the big chance. "I suppose you're trying to say that I walked out on Scott," he sighed.

"Stop it, Dex." Gay didn't bother to keep the contempt out of her voice. "Whatever sick heartaches I felt about you at first, Scott has taught me that there are men like you in the world and there's nothing we can do about it." Her eyes flashed. After a moment she said, "Scott's gone into New York to see you on business."

He couldn't help the start of surprise. Scott had not answered any of his letters, nor been in when he'd phoned. The first time he'd heard from Scott had been when

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Scott had written about Sarah and the guardianship. He knew, now, that Scott had been too busy falling in love with Gay to bother with the other man who'd loved her.

"My office will tell him where I am and he'll probably be waiting at my hotel. Apartment hotel," he amended quickly. He didn't want her to think that he was going to shove Sarah into a bleak hotel room by herself for Christmas. A beautiful bright idea struck him and, in his sudden eagerness, he touched her arm. "Sarah wouldn't feel half so strange and frightened if you'd ride into New York with us. Scott will be there and the four of us can have dinner to celebrate Sarah's arrival." He wasn't selling it, he could see that, and he made a last try. "It would mean a lot to Sarah to have you along with us, wouldn't it?"

Reluctantly, Gay admitted that it would. "I hoped I'd never have to see you again, Dex. Never." She looked levelly at him. "But because I love Sarah, I'll ride in with you."

"Why wouldn't you see me, Gay?" he demanded. "Why did you cut me off short without a word of explanation?" He was a fool to ask after what she'd done, but he could feel the tension build as he waited for her answer.

"Because," she told him evenly, "I don't like you."

Dex put his hands on her shoulders and jerked her closer to him, his face hard with anger. "That's a hell of a thing," he said harshly. "I took a New York job to try and get ahead in my profession just so I could give the girl I love more of the things she wanted. I thought..."

"I'm—I'm ready, Mr. Blake." Sarah sounded frightened and Dex moved quickly away from Gay. The child's face looked white and she was shockingly grateful when she found Gay was riding in with them.

"Think you'll like Christmas in New York, Sarah?" Dex tried to make it jovial.

Sarah smiled uncertainly. "New York will be lovely, Mr. Blake." Just as they started out of the reception room, Sarah's hand safely in Gay's, she turned and looked up at him. "You've been away, Mr. Blake?"

He felt the color rush up to his dark hair. It would be so simple to lie, to say he'd just gotten back from darkest Africa and had rushed up here. She watched him, waiting. And he knew he couldn't lie to this kid no matter what happened.

"I was at first, Sarah. I wasn't in New York, or I would have come to you." He was scarcely conscious that he drew in a long breath. "And lately, I've been busy."

Something flickered in her face and was gone. "Of course, sir." There was that beautiful dignity that didn't acknowledge hurt. No child should possess it.

Gay looked at him in puzzlement, but she said nothing. His throat felt as

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scratchy as an old rusty file. He vowed he'd make all this up to Sarah—somehow, some time.

NO ONE said anything as they piled into his coupe, Sarah in the middle. It wasn't until he turned out the gray gates that Sarah said, almost wistfully, "Do you still have your house in Laurelton, Mr. Blake?"

He smiled at her. Maybe she remembered that bob-sled ride after all, and the mess he'd made of the hot chocolate. "I still have it. And Mrs. Munford is still my housekeeper and keeps the place open, even if I never go up there any more."

All the way into New York Dex practically kept up a monologue. Gay didn't do anything to help, but sat staring out at the white glistening earth. It began to get on his nerves.

Often in the last months Dex had wondered why he'd been unable to work up any enthusiasm about Madeline Sawyer, the big boss's daughter. She'd shown she was receptive to their easy companionship growing into love, but he'd held back. He'd told himself that a struggling young lawyer, trying to get a foothold in a big law firm, couldn't make it in one easy jump from Madeline's shoulders. That's what he'd told himself, and he'd felt fine about it. But the whole thing had been a phony.

Looking over at Gay now, Dex knew she'd never really been out of his mind and heart, not since she'd given him the brush-off. Seeing her again, having her ride in his little coupe, brought it all back with a violent rush. All the old love was intensified because it had lain dormat for so long, buried deep in his heart. There'd be that old longing and loneliness again, that old ache. Seeing her was a fine Christmas present he'd given himself.

He talked fast to Sarah to keep from thinking any more. He dug out every interesting fact he'd accumulated about the great teeming city of concrete and steel, trying to sell New York to Sarah for Christmas. He was working out on the art galleries when Gay burst out laughing. It was real laughter, just like always, filled with that lovely bubbling delight he'd always loved. Well, what didn't he love about this sooty-haired girl?

"When does your sight-seeing bus leave for Chinatown, mister?" Gay asked and pulled Sarah closer to her. The child looked up at Dex and smiled shyly.

"All right! All right!" He grinned. "But Sarah'll like the zoo, I bet you."

They came down off the ramp and New York lay before Sarah. Dex watched to see if her big eyes would widen with excitement. They didn't. The city lay before her on a magic carpet and she just looked scared.

Christmas tingled through the air. There were great piles of snow; there were hurrying, gay shoppers, laughing as they bumped each other and juggled their stacks of packages; there was Santa Claus on the corner in his bright red suit and his white whiskers, ringing and ringing his bell by the fat black pot; there were wreaths on the lamp posts and the glittering windows of the shops on Fifth Avenue were Christmas in fairyland. But Sarah just looked scared.

The small lobby of Dex' apartment hotel on Sixtieth Street was bright with berries and wreaths when they came in out of the frosty afternoon. Dex remembered that he hadn't gotten any dolls or toys for a little girl, and cursed himself for his dumbness. Before he could speak to Gay about it, Scott Campbell got up from the lounge and came over to them.

SCOTT was almost as tall as Dex and very fair. He wore his good country tweeds with an air. Nothing was ever too good for Scott, not if it added to his appearance or to his comfort. Right now his surprise at seeing Gay here was almost ludicrous. He smiled, though.

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"Hi, people," he said. Then he kissed Gay lightly on her cheek before he patted Sarah's shoulder and held out his hand to Dex.

"Long time no see, Judge, and then you pop up with my girl." Scott kept smiling, but Dex knew by the sudden blankness in his eyes that he was angry and not happy at all about Gay's being here.

"I thought the four of us might have dinner to celebrate Sarah's first night in New York." Dex smiled too. "Let's go on up."

"Right." Scott took Gay's hand and tucked it under his arm. There was that easy familiarity in the gesture that people in love often acquire. Dex looked down at Sarah's small suitcase in his hand and was surprised to find that his knuckles were white. How dumb, he wondered, could a guy get? It's no good at all to watch the girl you've loved with the man she's going to marry.

"I want to talk business, Dex," Scott was pleasant. "Really important business." He winked at Gay.

"Sure," Dex said. He didn't even try to guess what it could be; they'd settled everything about the partnership months ago before he left for New York.

Upstairs, the apartment had never seemed so large and functionally masculine; but, of course, Dex had never tried to see it through a little girl's eyes before. The chairs were deep and made of soft green leather with large convenient ashtrays near them; the couch was a fine grained pigskin and the Matisse and Picasso prints were good. It was his bedroom though, that would be the payoff to Sarah.

He started to help Gay out of her coat when Scott playfully shoved him aside. "Prerogative of the bridegroom," he drawled. Then he leaned down and kissed her again. Dex suddenly wanted to sock him, and felt a little sick at his reaction toward the man who'd been his pal. For the first time in his life he felt the sharp pang of jealousy sear though him.

He turned to Sarah abruptly. "Want to come along to your room?" There was so much false cheerfulness in his voice that he winced. Oh, what the hell, he thought.

"We'll both go, Sarah." Gay laughed as she took Sarah's hand.

"Right back," Dex said to Scott and followed them down the small hall. Those curls at the back of Gay's neck were as saucy as ever and Dex wondered what she'd do if he kissed one as he used to do?

She stopped short in the open doorway of his room, shuddered slightly and went on in. Well, so the room was big, cold and strictly functional. A man's room. He put down the bag and snapped on the bed lamp. They didn't help. Maybe Sarah would rather change places with him and take the couch in the small library, knocking her head against the law books. He'd find out later.

"I'll get some toys," Dex told Gay. "Flowers and stuff." He left them there together and went back to Scott, who was looking out the window, his hands jammed into his trouser pockets.

"WHAT do you plan to do with Sarah?" Scott asked curiously. "You going to take her to the Stork Club and to see *Peep Show*?" He chuckled as he came to where Dex was mixing highballs at the portable bar.

"I'm killing myself laughing," Dex snapped. He found some ginger ale and poured a glass for Sarah.

"Hunt and Mary Leigh must have been mixed up to leave their kid to a bachelor—a man bursting with ambition and whose eye is on the boss's daughter." When Dex looked at him sharply he laughed. "I met the beautiful Madeline Sawyer at your office and she, my fine friend, is a dish."

"Who's a dish?" Gay's voice was amused. Dex wondered if she'd heard all that Scott had said.

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"Madeline Sawyer." Scott went right on with it. He smiled as he lit a cigarette for Gay and sat down beside her on the couch. "Dex, Gay and I are getting married right after the first of the year." He took the drinks Dex passed and handed one to Gay. "And we'd be glad to take her. She's nuts about Gay and fond enough of me to make it 'Uncle Scott,' so I think she'd be happy with us." He took a deep drink of his highball. "And, since we're taking Sarah off your hands, you can do something decent for me. You can sell me your old house in Laurelton. I'll pay cash."

This was fine, Dex thought, the way Scott was settling his life. He'd taken his girl, he was now trying to take his ward and his home—the house where he'd dreamed of having Gay as his own bride—once upon a time.

"My sister and her husband have our family place," Scott explained easily, his eyes watching Dex. "I've lived with them but, now," he took Gay's hand, "I want a place for Gay. She's always loved your house."

"I've admired it from across the road," she said softly and didn't look at Dex.

"Name your price, Dex." Scott patted his chest. "I'll send a check by the next mail."

The law business in Laurelton must have taken a big upswing if Scott could buy his house with such ease. Dex put down his glass and carefully lit a cigarette. "I'm not doing anything about Sarah until she knows what she wants herself. If she wants to go with you and Gay, fine. If she want to stay with me, that's fine too. The house, Scott, has been in my family for as long as I can remember. It's my home and my roots. I may want to come back to it some day."

"Are you kidding?" Scott was frankly amazed. "You'll never come back to Laurelton, not now. Look," he added quickly, "you're set in New York, Judge. You'll never come back home again. And I want your house as a wedding present to my girl. And you can't take Sarah, not really. She'll be a chain around your neck."

Dex heard a soft little sigh and his eyes flew to where Sarah stood in the doorway. She looked forlorn and afraid and he prayed that he hadn't heard what this big ox had said.

"Come in, Sarah," Dex called and grinned at her. "Your ginger ale is getting hot."

"Thank you," she said. She walked stiffly to his side. Her face shone with soap and water and her chestnut braids were smooth and neat.

"Did you get lost in that barn of mine?" he asked.

"No, Mr. Blake." Sarah sipped her drink. "It's big, though."

Scott looked annoyed at this interruption as he got to his feet. "Sure you won't change your mind about selling me your house?"

"Sure," Dex answered evenly. "I wouldn't want Gay to live there with any other man but me. I plannned it that way once, or maybe it was just a dream. But we'll let it ride."

"WAIT a minute." Scott's face was red and his eyes were hard. "I didn't make a play for Gay as long as I thought you were in love with her. I kept out and gave you a clear field. I didn't even let you know I loved her. But when you left and she was through with you, I told her how I felt. She's mine now, and you keep the hell out of it."

"I'm still not selling my house to you," Dex said quietly. He watched Gay put on her hat, he watched Scott angrily help her on with her coat. Not once did she glance in his direction.

"Want to come along home with us, Sarah?" Scott asked.

She hesitated, her eyes moved swiftly

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to Dex before she answered. "No, thank you. Mr. Blake has invited me to spend Christmas with him."

"If you change your mind, kiddo," Scott smiled at her, "have Mr. Blake telephone me at *home*." There was something triumphant in the way he stressed that "home."

"You won't stay in for dinner with Sarah and me?" Dex asked politely. If he didn't hold everything he'd end up by smashing Scott's face, or getting his own smashed in the fight. It didn't matter a damn which it was, just so he could start punching. He knew this was unfair; Scott told the truth, he hadn't made a move toward Gay until she'd been through with Dex.

"What's the use of pretending something that's gone, Dex?" Scott asked softly. "For a long time Gay and I have been through with you. Me, I hate your guts."

It was Gay who cut between them as Dex started to move. "Merry Christmas, Sarah," she said huskily.

"Merry Christmas," Sarah answered and tried to get some nice excitement into her scared voice.

Dex said nothing. He stood there until the door closed behind them, his face white. Then he sank down into his chair and stared out the window at nothing at all. Something was all wrong about this. Scott was too smug, too sure of himself. Dex began to wonder if he'd been responsible for Gay's change of attitude, in a nice subtle way.

He turned to Sarah, who was sitting back in a leather chair, her feet sticking out in front of her. It would be easier if he understood something about children, if he'd ever been around them. All he could do was to treat her as though she were grown up and keep it simple.

"This isn't any fun for you, Sarah." He smiled and she looked up in surprise. "We don't know each other very well, honey, and I expect I'll make mistakes with you. You'll have to forgive me until I can learn the hang of things." Her smile was wonderful and he saw her relax a little. "Let's get out of this dreary dump. Let's go get lost in the Christmas crowds."

"Oh, let's!" She jumped up and ran to his room for her coat.

OUTSIDE the lazy snow had begun to drift down. The big flakes clung to Sarah's lashes and Dex made feeble jokes about them. Her hand felt lost in his as they waited for a taxi. He'd take her over to Fifth Avenue and they'd get out in the Fifties and walk. Her eyes would grow big with the thrill of the gay crowd and he'd buy her all the things she wanted most. She'd laugh before they got back to the hotel. She'd really laugh with joy.

But the people frightened her as they came tumbling out of the crowded stores; the honking taxis and the lights bothered her and she didn't quite believe the windows were real. It wasn't until they'd crossed Fifty-sixth Street that she tugged at his hand, her eyes shining.

Next to the building a boy about fourteen stood with a floppy-eared puppy peeking out from under his coat. Like a homing pigeon Sarah made straight for the dog. She made soft little cries as she stroked the puppy's ears and he reached out a pink tongue to lick her hand.

"Buy a nice pup for the kid, mister?" the boy urged. "He's the last one and I'll make him cheap. Five bucks, blanket thrown in."

Sarah looked up at Dex, her big eyes begging. It was the only thing she'd wanted in a world of fantastic things. The pup looked as though he might be related to some cocker, sometime in the past. The boy thrust the dog at Sarah, dirty blanket and all, and she gathered him up into her arms.

Dex gave the kid a bill. "Keep the change for a present."

"Gee, thanks." The boy turned and

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ran, as though afraid they'd change their minds.

"I'll carry him under my coat," Dex got the puppy and the blanket settled inside his coat, then managed to flag down a cab. Riding back to the hotel Sarah kept staring with wide, unbelieving eyes at the silly, floppy-eared little mongrel. Her face was radiant and you could see her love grow. It was something of her own.

Going through the lobby of the hotel the dog barked sharply and the clerk at the desk looked as though he'd been shot. He fastened cold accusing eyes upon them as they hurried guiltily to the elevator. Sarah was laughing just the way a little girl should laugh. It sounded fine.

Upstairs they put the puppy down in the bedroom and Sarah took off her coat and flung herself down beside him. He was light tan, with eyes as brown as Sarah's, and he was ridiculous as he tried to run sideways. Dex stood there watching them until the pup yawned and finally curled up by the radiator.

"Could I call him Dex?" Sarah asked.

That wouldn't make it easy, but Dex grinned and bowed solemnly. "I would be honored. But do you think the pup might like Butch better?"

She was uncertain. "I don't know. May I think about it?"

"Definitely. While you're thinking I'll wash up. Your pup slobbered on me. We'll make out a menu for him and think about dinner for us." He took off his coat. "If he starts yelping smother him with love. Do anything to hush his noise." He chuckled and she laughed too.

Dex was still debating where to take her for dinner when he came out and found her sitting on a chair, just looking at the dog. Her face was white and pinched again. She had too much poise and dignity, too much hurt in her.

"Sarah," he said sharply and came to her. "What's happened?"

"The man at the desk telephoned and I answered." She swallowed and he saw the tears well up into her eyes. "The man said to tell you to get the dog out of here. Fast, he said."

"We'll see," he tried to sound confident and knew it was a dismal failure. He picked up the phone and there was no question about it; that's what the man said.

"We're in trouble, Sarah," he told her honestly. It took him a little time to light a cigarette while he tried to think. He couldn't take the puppy from her now, not if they all had to stand out in the street all night. Then he thought of the way out. Probably he had been in the back of his mind all the time, since he'd seen Gay again today and Sarah had asked if he still had his house in Laurelton. Since Scott had tried to buy it for his bride. Maybe he'd known all along that he was going home for Christmas with Sarah.

"I'll have to call a lovely girl and break a date." He grinned. "We'll take your dog and go home to Laurelton. No one's going to kick us around."

"You mean it?" she whispered. "Honest?"

"Honest. Pack up and we'll hit the road." He used the phone in his small study, and Madeline Sawyer neither understood nor liked their Christmas Eve date being broken because of a silly little dog and his mistress. But it really didn't matter. Dex grinned wryly as he went to pack..

THE SNOW was coming down harder now, in steady flakes that chased themselves endlessly around the street lamps, as they headed the car for Connecticut. Out of the city it was an almost silent white world with the rooftops waiting for Santa's reindeer.

He talked nonsense to Sarah while she kept the pup warm. They stopped at a roadside cafe and the three of them devoured hamburgers, since they were

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what Sarah and the dog wanted most.

Laurelton's stores were all open, their yellow and red lights making strange patterns across the snow-packed road. The faint music from the juke box blared out at them when the door of the Tavern opened. And Dex felt that old nostalgia for his home town.

He pushed down the familiar elm-lined road to his house and turned in the driveway. Across the road, Gay's cottage looked warm and cozy with its soft lights. The battered iron stag still stood forlornly in front of the circular driveway around his house, looking like a white ghost.

There were lights gleaming from his own living room and from the kitchen as Dex stopped the car. "Let's try to sneak in and surprise Mrs. Munford," he whispered in Sarah's ear, and she laughed delightedly. She seemed happy now that she was here in Laurelton with the puppy in her arms.

The living room looked as it always had for as long as Dex could remember. It was just as large and the logs in the stone fireplace shot sparks in the same old way. The chintz was as mellowed and the rugs as faded. Nothing had changed. There was even the low rocker that his grandmother had always used and the tall clock that you made a ceremony of winding. It was home.

Sarah and he tiptoed through the dining room and swung open the kitchen door. Mrs. Munford, fat and rosy, was explaining things carefully. "I use a mite more sage than most, a pinch you might say; then my bread crumbs, they're—"

"Gay!" Sarah shrieked and flew into her arms. Somehow the puppy got disentangled and skidded across the waxed linoleum to end up at Mrs. Munford's feet.

"Land's sakes," she cried. Then she saw Dex and smothered him in her big white apron. "You *did* come back. Land's sakes!"

Gay's incredulous eyes met him and the pink crept slowly into her lovely face. "I—I came over to get Mrs. Munford's recipe for turkey dressing," she stammered. "I had no idea you'd come back."

"Sarah's pup was being tossed out, so we left." Dex kept it light. She cared nothing for him, so he couldn't tell her how right she looked sitting here in his kitchen, where she'd sat so many times before. She looked just the way he'd dreamed about her for long months. It was strange that a man could love a girl so much when she didn't love him.

"Mrs. Munford, will you get in a big order for Christmas dinner? I'll drive in and pick it up." Dex offered Gay a cigarette and lit it for her. Their eyes met again through the flame of the match and clung for that brief moment.

Mrs. Munford looked worried, then she sighed and nodded. "I'll call Hanford's right away. But they'll deliver yet. Don't you want them to send this whopper order?"

"I'm going into town anyway," Dex told her easily.

Because Dex didn't want to look at Gay he busied himself with fixing a box by the stove for the puppy. It was good to be home, back with the friendly people he'd grown up with. He was tired, he suddenly realized—bone tired. It struck him with amazement that he'd taken almost no days off since he'd been in New York. He'd kept grinding away even Saturdays and Sundays.

"I'm meeting Scott for a late dinner at the Tavern," Gay said quietly. "It's a bad night and since you'll be going in town, will you drive me?"

HE COULD feel himself tighten up into a knot and he wanted to snatch her up and hold her close in his arms, close against his pounding heart. He wanted to kiss her until she could no longer think of Scott, but only of the love they'd almost

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had. Of its magic that he'd thought she shared.

"Sure," he said evenly. "I'll take you in."

"Order's being put up." Mrs. Munford fluttered importantly. "Got everything I could think of. Sarah, get that cur some milk."

Gay and Dex left Sarah drinking milk and crackers and the puppy drinking his, his big floppy ears falling into his saucer. Sarah almost didn't know they'd gone, she was so absorbed in her dog.

"She's lost her heart." Gay laughed softly.

"The kid has something of her own now," he answered.

The night was cold under a leaden sky. Somewhere a branch snapped and they heard the icicle crack. Dex circled the house and drove out the driveway, skidding a little as he hit the road.

"Why did you come back here, Dex?" Gay asked so low that he almost couldn't hear her.

"Sarah's pup—and I suppose I wanted to come home," he answered simply. He didn't add that she was here, across the road, and it was Christmas. A man can be near his love once more at Christmas.

"It was so foolish." Her voice sounded tight under its control.

A car floundered in the ruts and Dex pulled out to the side of the road and stopped. After the car passed he turned to Gay. She was looking at him, her eyes so very deep and luminous that he caught his breath sharply.

"You never loved me, Gay?" he said softly. "But I almost love you enough for both of us." He reached for her and pulled her into his arms. "This is your Christmas present to me."

He kissed her then. Her lips were stiff and firm under his, fighting his urgency and hungry demand. Her body braced itself against him and at last she tore herself out of his arms.

"Isn't it enough," the words seemed to tear out of her, "that you're a double-crosser? Do you have to double-cross Scott with his girl, too?"

He stared at her, and the vein in his forehead throbbed. "I never double-crossed anyone in my life. You should know that," he told her harshly. "Never. Don't worry, baby, I'll never kiss you again as long as I live. That I promise you." He jammed down the gas and they slid before he brought the car back under control.

They said nothing. The only sound in the still night was the throb of the engine straining against the deep snow. At the Tavern she got out quickly, saying nothing, not even glancing back at him.

Dex cursed himself softly, using every word he'd ever heard. She'd shown him once that she cared nothing for him, so why did he have to ask for it again? The old Yuletide rushing at him, making him foolish and sentimental.

There was room to squeeze in at Handford's and Dex parked and jumped out. He wanted to see his old friends again, people he'd known all his life. Then maybe he could forget Gay and that he'd kissed her.

"Hi!" He grinned as he came rushing into the store. Some of his old pals looked at him. There was disbelief in their eyes before it frosted into unfriendliness. They turned back to their individual business, ignoring him.

HOT ANGER rushed through him. All he wanted was to hit out, but he was stunned. This was something that a native had never had to take before. To be cut dead.

"Your order's ready, Mr. Blake," Old man Hanford said stiffly, and shoved a bill into his hands. Dex paid it and picked up the heavy, bulging box.

Outside, he shoved it into his car. He let the cold air wash over his face, hoping it would clear his brain. Then he noticed

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a guy he'd gone to school with, standing there watching him, a big Constable's star on his coat. "Tom!" Dex called, and felt better.

"Yeah," Tom said and peered sharply at him. "Am I ever dumb with surprise! I'd a thought this would be the last place you'd ever come back to. What's wrong, Dex? Can't you make as big a fee out of your city cases as you flimflammed out of your last case?"

"What the hell do you mean?" Dex voice was tight.

"Aw, cut it, chum." Tom laughed nastily. "Don't try to be fooling the town yokels. We was here, remember?" He turned abruptly and walked away into the still white night.

Dex stood there for a long time, stunned bewilderment in his gray eyes. The last case he'd been working on was that accident case for old Jake, the town's drunk. But he'd left it all for Scott, the affidavits, the outline of the entire case. He'd left it so cut and dried that even Scott couldn't fail to get old Jake a decent settlement. Slowly, things began to come clear—a lot of things.

Dex jerked the car away from the curb and made a U-turn. In a minute he was back at the Tavern and almost running through the doors. This time he didn't make the mistake of speaking to anyone whom he'd known all his life. He just went across to the booths and looked until he found Gay and Scott.

Without ceremony, Dex slid next to Gay. He leaned across the table and looked at Scott. "All right, chum," he said evenly. "Let's have it without trimmings. I'm getting the cold shoulder in my own town and Tom said I'd flimflammed my last client. That was Jake in that accident case, only you handled it. Give."

"I told Gay just now that you'd be forced to try and blame me." Scott lit a cigarette, amusement in his eyes. "I said this was your only hope when she told me you'd come back with Sarah. But I told you in New York that we're no longer friends, and I'm not even going to try and cover you on *this* one. The others—" He shrugged.

"You're lying!" Dex's face was white. "You never covered me for anything in your life." He reached across the table and grabbed a handful of Scott's smart tartan sports jacket, half rising in the booth. Before he could hit Scott, Gay grabbed his arm.

"Please. Oh, please get out of here and leave us alone." Her voice rose a little almost out of control. "Haven't you done enough to us for just having loved you once?" Her fingers bit into his arm. "Please, Dex."

"Honey," he said softly, "you've got things to learn."

"I don't intend to have Gay's Christmas ruined by you," Scott's face was red with anger and he raised his voice so that other people looked over at their booth.

Slowly, Dex got up and smiled crookedly. "Merry Christmas, Gay," he said, then he walked out of the Tavern. Tonight he could prove nothing, and he could do nothing until after Christmas. But he could wait.

Driving home, Dex decided that he'd not even think about this mess until after Sarah had had her Christmas. This was the first without Mary and Hunt Leigh and he wanted it to be as good for Sarah as he could make it.

IT WAS late Sunday morning when Dex finally awakened and dressed hurriedly. It was snowing again, big fluffy flakes that looked like miniature puff balls. Going downstairs he saw that someone had been out gathering red berries and had hung mistletoe over the entrance to the living room. He could hear Sarah and Mrs. Munford talking in the kitchen and he smiled. It sounded good.

While Dex ate breakfast Sarah told him

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how she'd found the berries and that Gay had helped her with the mistletoe, since Gay knew the secret places where it grew. He remembered how they'd gone out and found it together just a year ago, and how he'd hung a spray in Gay's black shining hair and they'd kissed. He wondered if she remembered, too. Last night in the Tavern she'd asked if he hadn't done enough to her for just having loved him, but it couldn't have meant what he wanted it to, since she'd included Scott.

They went out to find a big spruce and he chopped it down and carried it back to the house. Sarah helped him make its wooden standard, then she and the puppy skipped upstairs to the attic with Mrs. Munford to drag down the boxes of old ornaments that stretched back through Dex's childhood.

He sat the big tree in front of the bay window and stood for a moment looking across the road to Gay's cottage. Smoke curled from the chimney and he wanted desperately to go over and make her listen to his heart. Maybe, then, her own would answer.

"Could we trim our tree this afternoon?" Sarah asked, her eyes shining as she looked up at the big spruce.

"Sure." He grinned at her. "You can fix it for as high as you can reach, then I'll do the top."

He was carefully fastening some red balls on the tree late that afternoon, when Dex saw a shape crouch by the side window in the dusk. Before he could move, a rock crashed the glass and he dove for Sarah and lifted her out of the way. The rock bounced harmlessly on the carpet.

"Get behind that chair," he ordered and ran out of the house. It wasn't hard to catch old Jake and force him back into the house.

Jake's coat was torn and dirty and his bleary eyes were hot with hatred. "Scott told me you was in town and I swore I'd get you. And I will," he promised. "I was the one hit by that car the young kid drove, and I deserved the money. But you took the big settlement and scrammed with it to New York."

Dex pulled the old man around so that he faced him. "Do you know what you're talking about?" he demanded curtly.

"I know. You bet I know. Just the day before you left town Scott brought me all them papers you wanted me to sign, lots of them. He said you told him it was for the settlement out of court from that rich pa of that young squirt, that friend of your boss." He shivered. "A week later Scott come and says you skipped with my money and I can't do nothin' about it on account of them papers I signed. But Scott give me a hundred dollars."

"And you told everyone in town I cheated you," Dex said.

"Me and Scott told 'em. I didn't understand it good," Jake admitted. "All I know is I got nothin'."

"You got cheated," Dex told him quietly. "But good." It was all clear now—where Scott had gotten the money to buy Dex's house; why he'd been so angry yesterday when he'd found Gay and Dex together, wondering what had been said. No one in town would believe Jake's details, but they'd all believe that Dex cheated him if Scott backed it up. Scott who loved fine clothes and things for his comfort, who was too lazy to practice law if the fish were biting. And who wanted a black-haired girl with deep blue eyes.

"I'll get what money I can back for you, Jake. I didn't even know there'd been a settlement. It was Scott who arranged that and took your money. Go out into the kitchen and Mrs. Munford will give you some food and coffee." Sarah was holding the puppy, her eyes wide. Dex grinned at her reassuringly. "Hey, Jake," he called and the old man turned back. "Did you tell Miss Gay this story?"

"Yep. Scott said to be sure to and I

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did, right after you left town. Scott said she was too nice a girl to be mixed up with a crook." Jake looked sheepish. "I ought to have talked to you first, Dex, before I said them things. But that Scott, ain't he the one?" He went out muttering to himself.

WHEN Dex turned back to the tree, Sarah had gone. Only the puppy huddled by the fire. Absently, he went on trimming the tree. It would be simple enough to prove that the settlement check had been paid to Scott, easy to check his bank balance and his deposits. He must have wanted Gay terribly to build a life on this house of cards.

The lights were strung on the tree and the big silver star was fastened on the top when Dex lit it. It was a beautiful tree, shimmering with tinsel and color. A tree that any little girl should love, he thought.

The puppy tugged at his trousers and he got down on the floor with him. "Are you lonesome, too, pal?" he asked.

They were sitting there when Sarah came into the room and drew in a long breath. "It's so beautiful," she said softly. She came and sat down beside him and he put his right arm around her. Most of the hurt was gone from her eyes and he vowed he'd keep it that way.

"Could I call the puppy Butch, Uncle Dex?" she asked.

She hadn't realized that she'd called him "Uncle," and Dex swallowed hard. "Yes, Sarah, it's a fine name."

"It's a lovely Christmas Eve." She put her head against him and he held her.

Someone came in softly and sat down on the other side of him. The lights shone on her black hair, and he put his arm around Gay.

"What can I say to you?" she asked. "Sarah told me about Jake. I never stopped loving you, Dex, even Scott knew that. I phoned him and told him about Jake. He's leaving town tonight, and he's giving the key to the office to Tom for you. In case you ever want to open it again yourself and come home for good." Tears glistened on her long lashes like stars. "Can you ever forgive me, Dex?"

"Hush, darling." He laughed softly and pulled them both closer into his arms. "This is a wonderful Christmas Eve because I have my two girls. And I'll never let them go." He could feel the wild pounding of his heart. "I'll settle things up in New York and I'll come back here and open the office. You see, we can't keep Butch in New York."

Sarah shouted and scrambled to her feet. She ran from the room, laughing, with Butch at her heels.

Dex kissed Gay then. Her lips were warm and alive beneath his, giving her heart with her kiss as he gave his back to her. And the star on the top of the tree twinkled down more brightly.

Shadows

A shadow on a sun-bright day
Will never quite depart,
So, too, the shadow of your love
Still falls across my heart.

—Catherine E. Berry

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Linda learned that business can mix with pleasure—if she's the man's business.

Stop the Romance!

By
VIOLA CORNETT

BARR DAWSON still had the same offices as when she'd worked for him. Waiting with Jenny Lester to see him, Linda Farrell looked around the rather battered room, and thought it was a strange outer office for a successful theatrical producer. But many of them were like this—informal, purely for interviewing talent.

Linda concentrated on unimportant details because she didn't want to think of the quarrel a year before. She didn't want to think of Barr Dawson, behind that closed door—big and black-eyed and black-haired. Barr, who'd said that he wouldn't be imprisoned by any woman's jealousy . . .

Jenny Lester said, stretching out a perfect silken leg to admire it dreamily, "Here's hoping Dawson likes the play—and likes me as a second lead. You and Dan are sweet to deal me in, Linda."

Linda smiled at her. Both girls were red-haired, but there was no further resemblance between them. Jenny was all Broadway, dressed to attract attention, though in good taste. Linda was Broadway, too, but one of those who worked behind the scenes. Dramatizing others, not herself, was her job. She was lovely, and her gray suit and black accessories were perfection. She was a talent scout, and a clever one, for New Age Pictures.

Linda said, "I think you'll do well in the part of Laura, Jenny. Though you're primarily a singer and dancer, it's a gay role, and suits you."

"Thanks, honey. You know how much I'd like to hit the big time. Being part of the floor-show in a Village night-club isn't my idea of success."

The door of the private office opened then, and Barr Dawson ushered out the man he was interviewing. Linda's heart jumped at the sight of Barr. She'd seen him at a distance occasionally, at theatrical premieres, during the year of separation, but to be this close again . . .

The other man left. Barr turned to Linda and Jenny. He said, "Hello, Linda. Nice to see you." He stretched out a hand.

Her own trembled a little as she took his hand. His clasp was warm and firm. Then their hands dropped apart, and Linda said, "Jenny, this is Barr Dawson. Barr, I brought Jenny Lester along because she is ideal for the part of Laura, and I wanted you to meet her."

She was presuming a bit. He'd phoned her after she had mailed him Dan's play, and asked her to come in to see him. He hadn't said he had any idea of producing it; he had been strictly noncommittal. But Jenny had been so eager to come along, and Jenny was a nice kid . . .

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Barr nodded to Jenny, and smiled at her. She put on her best smile in return. She was used to putting on her best smile for those who might do her some good.

Then Barr went on, "Come in, Linda." He turned toward his private office.

Jenny winked at Linda. The wink meant "Good hunting." As Linda followed Barr into the other office, she wondered how much Jenny knew about herself and Barr. They'd never been officially engaged because she'd never let it go that far; she had been afraid to get in too deep. But there'd been a few items in the gossip columns about a certain producer whose lovely secretary didn't like him squiring his equally lovely stars around. Well, what if Jenny knew? Only Linda didn't want Dan to know there had been a personal as well as a business relationship between herself and Barr a year before. It would hurt Dan's male pride if he thought his fiancee was asking an old love to produce his play.

SHE REMEMBERED the private office so well, too. The models of theatrical sets, the screen that concealed the washbowl in one corner, the signed photographs on the walls, the battered file-cabinet near the windows looking down five stories to the rush of the street. Coming back to a place where you'd once experienced fiery emotions was an unsettling thing. All the months between seemed to vanish for a crazy moment.

Quietness and sanity returned to her then. Yes, she'd come to talk over a play. A play written by Dan O'Hara, the man to whom she was engaged. She managed a smile as Barr waved her to the chair opposite his, across the well-worn desk.

Suddenly there was a little creak, and a breeze found Linda's slim legs. She realized that the connecting door still would open at odd moments for no reason. Another unsettlingly familiar incident. But she was glad of the half-open door. Having Jenny Lester in the outer office gave her a sense of not being alone with Barr. And she didn't want to be alone with him, there were too many of those memories jumping up out of the past right now.

Barr picked up the manuscript on the desk. She recognized the blue cover, and, even upside down, the title of Dan's play: *April Meeting*.

A little shiver went through Linda. There were moments that meant so much, moments upon which your whole life hung. With an intensity of feeling that was like a tangible third presence in the room, she wanted Barr to like Dan's play, to be enthusiastic about it, to say he'd produce it. Then she could go back to Dan with hope—no, victory—in her hands. And Dan could quit the salesman's job he hated so, and take his first step on the climb to the success he was hungry for.

She didn't close her eyes; she kept the wide, sweet blue of them fixed on Barr's expressionless face. But she had the feeling of closing them, and praying.

Then she said in a casual voice that hurt her throat with the effort to be casual, "What do you think of it?"

Barr didn't answer immediately. He was frowning, leafing through the pages of the manuscript in a thoughtful way. Finally he put the thick sheaf down and looked at her. He took a battered pack of cigarettes from his pocket—it was typical of Barr not to use an elegant gold or silver cigarette-case—and held it out to her.

She wanted to take one, but she didn't. She shook her head. She was afraid her hand would tremble as she stretched it out, and she didn't want him to see it tremble. She said, "No, thanks, I just had one."

He took a cigarette for himself, still frowning, and returned the pack to his pocket. He tore a match from a paper

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book, and bent to the light. Leaning back, he inhaled deeply, then removed the cigarette from his mouth, and smoke poured from his nostrils. He said, "How have you been, Linda?"

She wanted to scream. Did he have to talk trivialities when her whole being was tense with desire to learn what he thought of Dan's play? But she said, trying to make her voice easy, "Fine."

HE LAID the cigarette down in an ashtray. "You certainly landed yourself quite a job after you left here." He laughed. "You impressed Christman of New Age when you sold him that play for me. Every time he hits New York, he wails about the way you handed him a pig in a poke. He thinks you're the smartest little business woman he ever ran into—that's why he hired you to scout for New Age Pictures."

She nodded. "I know. If I hadn't sold him *Sweet Daring* when I did, you'd have lost money on it. It folded a week later."

"And you quit working for me two weeks later." Barr's voice was very even.

Linda turned her head from side to side restlessly. Being here brought back so much of memory, anyway. She didn't want Barr harking back to the past.

He went on, staring at her, "You were a little foolish, blowing up the way you did, and walking out, Linda. We were a team."

Her soft mouth tightened. Yes, she thought, a team. But it was you who broke things wide open. Seeing you kissing Rosalie Bennett, right here in this office, was the last straw. I'd seen you kiss so many girls in that casual way, every lovely new star meant another excursion into heartbreak where I was concerned. Barr Dawson, who enjoyed lovely women the way some men enjoy fishing or hunting or stamp-collecting.

He went on. "Rosalie didn't mean a thing to me. You know that."

She moistened her lips, trying to keep herself calm. But she couldn't quite manage it. She said vehemently, "No, Rosalie didn't mean a thing to you. Neither did Cecelia. Or Margot. Or any of the others, did they?"

His black eyes narrowed a little. "No, they didn't. And you know it."

She fought for poise, achieved it. Then she said quietly, "That's all water under the bridge. I came here to see what you think of Dan O'Hara's play."

"Oh, yes." He pulled the manuscript toward him again. But he didn't glance through it. Once more, suddenly and disconcertingly his black gaze met hers. "You asked me to look this over as a personal favor to you You wouldn't ask that for just anybody. Who is this Dan O'Hara, anyway?"

She felt cold inside. If she told him the truth, he might turn the play down, flat. But she was wearing Dan's engagement ring, and probably Barr had already noticed that. In any case, it would be impossible to conceal the truth from him for long. She said evenly, "Dan is my fiance."

Evidently he hadn't noticed her ring, for his face went a bit white, and his jaw ridged. There was an odd little space of silence, and then he laughed harshly. He said, "And so I'm supposed to play Lord Bountiful to your romance? Well, well."

So he still felt possessive toward her. She'd been afraid of that. But he had no right. A sudden gush of anger went through Linda, and she lifted her chin spiritedly. "I'm not asking any favors, not really. Dan's play is good. It would pay you to produce it."

"Oh?" He drawled the word, in a maddening way he had. The slant of his smile was mocking.

"Yes!" She spoke so violently that her voice broke.

He looked her up and down slowly, his mouth quirking. "I gather you love the

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guy or you wouldn't be coming to me to get him launched. Charming. Or has every other producer on Broadway turned his play down?"

That was too close to the truth to be funny. She'd been knocking on other doors, pulling every string she could for Dan, without luck. Barr was a last resort, and she'd had to fight pride violently before she sent him the play. But she knew better than to act desperate. She said coolly, "It's the type of thing you do well—the young-love story. I'm simply bringing the play to the best possible market, that's all."

"Do tell." He played with the manuscript, flipping his fingers up and down the thick sheaf of it. Finally he went on, "Suppose I said I'd produce this—for a consideration?"

She stiffened. "If you mean—"

His eyes went past her, to the half-open door. He got up deliberately, went over and closed it. Then he came back to stand beside her.

SHE'D forgotten how big he was, how menacingly he could loom over you. With some crazy notion of making their heights more equal, she rose to her feet, faced him. Defiance was in her eyes, in the lift of her chin.

His hands clamped on her shoulders. He pulled her close, held her in front of him. Then he leaned his black head, and his lips captured hers in the old and conquering way.

And it was the old, crazy, frightening magic. Past and present mingled in a chaos of feeling that made her go limp and helpless in his arms. She was possessed by that kiss for a moment, robbed of will by it.

Then sanity came back, and she pulled free of him, eyes blazing. She raked the back of her hand across her lips in an instinctive, furious gesture. "I might have expected this from you!"

She started to pick up the manuscript, but he caught her wrist. "No."

They stared at each other like duellists before the last, fatal thrust. Then she said, her voice furiously low, "Let me go, Barr."

But he held her wrist. He said, "The thing is good. I'll produce it."

"Why?"

"Just because it's good—and I'm a smart business man. Do you think I'd let a profitable investment walk out the door just because of a purely personal feeling?"

"I don't know. I don't understand you; I've never understood you. Or trusted you."

His smile was wry. "You don't have to trust me, or distrust me. This is an impersonal matter. Your boy friend has written a good play. Maybe a little rough around the edges, but I can fix that up. You can help me, we were always a smart team. The thing will make money for Dawson Productions. That's all I need to know."

Then he let go of her wrist. "Leave the manuscript here. Tell O'Hara to come in and see me tomorrow morning. I'll give him the best deal he'll get anywhere."

A vague feeling of disappointment went through her. Somehow she resented his suddenly impersonal tone—after that kiss. But she crushed the absurd emotion down. Barr didn't mean a thing to her any more. It was Dan, and Dan's success, that mattered.

Despite the fact that she didn't trust him in anything that concerned the emotions, she knew that in business affairs, Barr was absolutely straight. If he said he'd produce Dan's play, he'd do it. Linda took in a long and trembling breath. "All right. I'll have Dan come in."

She turned toward the door, without a good-by. In the outer office, Jenny Lester

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looked at her with wide and excited brown eyes. She managed to give the other girl a steady, reassuring smile. Jenny lit up like a neon sign. In the hall, she grabbed Linda's arm and shook it. "Will he produce it?"

Linda nodded. "Yes. He thinks it's a good bet."

A sudden veiled look came over Jenny's face. She studied Linda curiously, but said nothing immediately. Finally, in the elevator, she said, "Do I get the part?"

"I didn't get a chance to talk to him about that. But I'm sure you will, if Dan and I speak for you."

Jenny sighed dreamily. "Oh, man. A second lead on Broadway. This is the life."

Linda smiled, and patted her friend's arm absently. She was still trembling a little from that kiss. It had brought back such a crazy rush of memory.

Jenny looked at her shrewdly. "Anything wrong?"

Linda shook her head. "No. Just excited. I can hardly wait to see Dan's face."

"Same here." Jenny's voice was soft and warm. "He's been hoping so long."

Linda smiled at her. "I'll call him, and we'll all have dinner together at my apartment tonight. A real celebration."

"Swell." Jenny's tone had an oddly far-away sound, but Linda didn't notice that. She felt far-away herself. It was as though part of her were still back in that battered inner office, with its models of theatrical sets, and the signed photographs of stars on the walls. Back in Barr's office—in his arms.

DAN SAID, rising to his feet, "Ladies and gentlemen, friends and fellow citizens, I drink to *April Meeting*. May it play the year 'round, to packed houses."

Jenny, Linda, and Dan were in Linda's apartment. The wintry weather outside was forgotten in the warmth of happiness that filled the little dinette. Linda wore a blue gown that matched her eyes; Jenny was dramatic in gold, with gold hoops at her small ears. Blond, slim Dan was doing the honors with the champagne he'd bought for the celebration. This was the after-dinner toast, and Jenny and Linda drank it with him.

Dan was charming, Linda thought for the millionth time, looking up at him as she finished her drink. He had a boyish appeal, enhanced by a sophisticated smoothness—a delightful combination. His smile was sweet and ready, and he was as quick-witted as they came. They had met at the apartment of a mutual friend six months after she left Barr. As a matter of fact, the mutual friend was Jenny Lester, who had introduced Dan to Linda as "the Eugene O'Neill of the future." Only Dan didn't write deep, serious plays like O'Neill; his were more the light touch of Noel Coward—bittersweet modern dialogue, love-stories with tongue in their cheek. Dan was going places, and Linda realized that. Only that hadn't been the attraction, of course. Linda didn't need any man to carve her way in the world; she was quite capable of providing her own caviar and champagne, if she had wanted them. It was his charm that got her, the trick he had of saying unexpected, lovely things in an almost impersonal voice. And his gentleness. He had a way of cherishing a woman—and Linda needed cherishing. She still felt broken inside after the emotional rough-housing she'd taken from Barr.

Dan sat down. He beamed around the table. "Gals, this is it. We're on our way. Next stop—success!"

Jenny looked at him with warm eyes. "You deserve it, Dan. You've really worked for this."

"Thanks, honey." He leaned over and patted her hand. Jenny and Dan had

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such a swell friendship, Linda thought. Jenny had rooted for Dan all the way because she believed in him. Jenny was a darned nice kid, and Linda was glad she was going to get an opportunity in Dan's play. Because she was sure Barr would give Jenny the part of Laura if she, Linda, asked him to.

Or would he? Barr had turned hard and unemotional at the end of the interview; he'd been strictly business. Linda's wide blue eyes darkened. Strange how that memory disturbed her more than the memory of Barr's kiss.

Then Dan turned to her, and took her hand. He said softly, "Thanks so darned much, Linda. This is all your doing."

She smiled at him. Dan was such a darling. She was terribly glad she'd been able to get his play produced. "As Jenny said, you deserve it."

"Amen to that," Jenny added. It seemed to Linda that there was a tense, harsh note in Jenny's voice. But when she looked at the other girl, she knew she must have been mistaken, for Jenny was smiling.

LINDA COULDN'T keep her eyes off Barr, up there on the stage directing Jenny in a scene—though Dan was sitting beside her. Barr was coatless, as always when he directed, and she noticed, as though for the first time, the width of his shoulders, the narrowness of his hips. He was a good-looking devil, she thought grimly. Not that he ever seemed to pay the slightest attention to that fact. Women did, though. And she remembered the Rosalies, and the Cecelias, and the Margots . . .

Her hands clenched. For a moment, there was a harsh knot of memory inside her. Then she regained her poise. Barr and his emotional entanglements were no longer a part of her life. Dan was the one who mattered to her, and Dan was so sweet, so gentle.

She realized suddenly that Dan was frowning. She turned to him. "Anything wrong?"

He shook his head. "No. Nothing." But the frown remained. He looked bothered and thoughtful, as though he were trying to figure something out.

Linda worried over him for a moment, but he apparently wasn't going to tell her what was bothering him, so finally she dismissed his mood from her mind, and concentrated on the scene on the stage.

That was rather troubling, though. Jenny had gotten the part of Laura; Linda had asked this of Barr as a particular favor. But she seemed a little stiff in the part. Well, she *was* primarily a singer and dancer, and a part in a musical comedy would have been more up her alley, but such parts were few and far between where an untried actress was concerned. Jenny was lucky to have this part, though Barr was giving her rather a bad time.

Not that he was being unpleasant; he was too wise a director for that. But he rehearsed Jenny over and over. He was satisfied with nothing less than perfection in a scene. He had always been like that. Jenny was looking awfully tired, and somewhat rebellious.

Rehearsals had been going on for a week, afternoons and evenings. Linda had been able to attend only the evening rehearsals consistently; she was busy during the day. But she was aware that they were not going as well as might be. Actually, the play seemed a little thinner when witnessed on a stage than it did when one read it. The dialogue was clever, the love-scenes charming, but the plot was a mere thread.

Barr hadn't yet called her in for the consultations he'd said he wanted to have with her about the play. Linda frowned a little. As a matter of fact, Barr rather seemed to be avoiding her. She couldn't understand it.

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At last Barr said, "Okay, that'll have to do for tonight. But we'll hit this again tomorrow, Jenny. Concentrate overnight on what I've told you, will you?"

"When do I sleep?" Jenny flipped. She was smiling, but the smile looked forced. Linda could tell she was tired and upset.

Barr shrugged on his coat, which was draped over a chair on the stage, then came down with Jenny to join Dan and Linda. The rest of the cast had already left, Barr had kept Jenny to rehearse a scene she did alone.

Jenny said, "I could use a drink. Also a steak, maybe. Why don't we all go out for a midnight snack somewhere?" And she looked at Dan questioningly.

But it was Barr who answered. "Swell idea. Wait till I get my car." And suddenly his black eyes were looking into Linda's with a repressed intensity that made her tremble.

They found a small dine and dance place in the theatrical district, and sat down at a corner table. It happened to be a restaurant where Linda had often gone with Barr when she worked for him. Sitting there, she felt a rush of memory go through her. Momentarily, Dan and Jenny vanished from her consciousness, and she and Barr were alone at the table, his black eyes smiling into hers as they'd once done, his deep voice saying things that made her feel warm inside.

The arrival of the waiter brought her back to herself, and she realized that Barr's eyes weren't smiling just now—in fact, they looked hard, remote—and that he was being quite silent, except for the necessary giving of their orders to the waiter. The waiter gone, he fell quiet again, frowning down at his plate.

Jenny was the only one who said much during the meal, and Dan was the only one who gave her much response. Barr and Linda ate almost without speaking.

The meal ended. Barr said abruptly, "Let's dance. Care if I have this one with Linda, Dan?" He didn't glance at Linda.

Dan gave him a quick look. "No, of course not."

Linda wanted to refuse to dance with Barr, but somehow couldn't. Rising as he did, she went into his arms wordlessly.

She hadn't danced with him in a year, yet her body knew every move of his, it was as though she'd danced with no other man during the year. Her muscles, her nerves, her whole being recognized and welcomed his touch, while her mind fought the hold he had over her emotions.

WHEN THE dance ended, they were standing next to an exit which led into a pleasant inside patio. Barr nodded toward the door. "Care to sit the next one out with me?"

Again she wanted to refuse his request, but again she followed his lead silently.

Then they were in the patio, with the soft, mysterious fluorescent lights in concealed places, and the little fountain tinkling in the center of the tiled floor. The wall was lined with a long, padded bench, exquisitely luxurious, upholstered in blue. The ceiling was painted pale blue, also, and here and there were stars dotting it, done with paint that gleamed in the semi-darkness.

It was a place made for lovers. But she and Barr were the only people here, and . . .

He led her to a place near a corner of the long bench, and seated her. He dropped down beside her, and sat there without speaking for a moment, staring at the lights, rainbow-varied, that played from underneath through the spray of the fountain. Then he turned to her slowly. He said, "I've tried to keep away from you. I've told myself only a fool would think he could revive something that's supposed to have died a year ago. But I'm going to try it, just the same. I want you back, Linda."

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She'd been expecting this. She felt her heart beat fast with a crazy sort of sheer feminine triumph. She had to stiffen herself with every bit of will she possessed to keep from showing how his words had really affected her. But she managed it. And she said coldly, "It's too late. You know that, Barr."

His mouth tightened, a line of white showed around it. His black eyes seemed blacker than ever as he said, "If it's the Rosalies, and the Cecelias, and the Margots you're remembering, you can forget them. No woman has meant a damn to me since you walked out, Linda. You spoiled other women for me."

She sat very still. Dared she believe him? But no, this was just another line. When she'd walked out on him a year before, he had tried every trick in the book to get her back—flowers, notes, telephone calls, the works. Well, he hadn't succeeded then, and he wasn't going to succeed now. Dan O'Hara was her man; Barr Dawson belonged to the past.

She said, "You always could argue convincingly, Barr. But I know you too well, and it won't work."

His hand fell on her bare arm suddenly, and clenched there until the pain of his hold made her want to cry out. He said hoarsely, "You're hard as nails, Linda. You make up your mind stubbornly, and won't change it. Is that fair?"

Now she was furious. She jerked her arm free, and put her other hand protectively over the reddened place that he had hurt. She cried, "Fair? You're a peculiar one to use that word, Barr. When were you ever fair to me? It was one woman after another, though you said you loved me, and—"

He interrupted her sharply, "I've told you other women don't interest me any more."

"Oh, no? From the reports in the gossip columns, you've been squiring your usual quota to this and that night-club and premiere."

He shook his head from side to side in a badgered way. "Damn it, what do you expect me to do—play hermit? This is Broadway, Linda. A few drinks, a few laughs, a few dances . . . so what? But it didn't mean a damned thing. How can I make you understand that?"

She stood up abruptly. "You can't. So let's go back to the others. And no more of this trying to cut in on Dan's territory, Barr. I play it straight, even if you never did!"

Without waiting for him, she started toward the door that led into the main room. Just outside of it, he caught up with her. He said grimly, "I haven't given up, Linda."

She laughed harshly. "What do you intend to do—blackmail me? Once, in your office, you intimated you'd produce Dan's play for a consideration. Does my love go along with the deal?"

He said, very low, "I don't have to blackmail you. You love me, Linda, you still love me. Only you've blinded yourself to your own feelings. Your resentment is so strong it keeps you from seeing clearly."

Angrier than before, she walked forward swiftly to the table. The dance had ended, Jenny and Dan were waiting there. They were talking seriously, as Linda neared them, she heard Jenny say, "That would be a much better deal for both of us. But don't break the news too suddenly to—" Then, seeing Linda and Barr, she stopped talking for a startled moment. But, immediately, she smiled. "Hi, there, you two. Enjoy the dance?"

Linda wondered what Jenny had been talking to Dan about, but she was too upset to wonder about it much. Sinking into a chair beside Dan, she found herself trembling with reaction, and inwardly she cursed Barr. What right did he have to try to drag a dead emotion out of the

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past and revive it? Well, she'd just guard against seeing him alone again, that was all.

BARR called her at her office next morning. His voice was crisp and businesslike. "Linda, we've got to tighten the play up in spots, add in a few twists to strengthen it. How about coming over here and lending me a hand this morning?"

His tone said there'd been no emotional scene between them the previous night. Linda bit her lip. She wanted to tell him to go to the devil. But he was right, Dan's play did need some doctoring. And apparently he was thinking of nothing but business at the moment. She said, her voice as crisp as his own had been, "All right. Be there in fifteen minutes."

It wasn't far from her office to his, she was able to walk it in the stated time. Her feet felt as heavy as lead, but, conversely, she was filled with a nervous, almost hysterical excitement. She wanted Barr to keep things on a businesslike basis, and yet something inside her protested against the knowledge that he wanted to see her only for a practical reason.

When she entered his office, she was quite poised, though, and her chin was high as the secretary ushered her in to see Barr. He rose from behind his desk, snubbing out a cigarette in the big ashtray to his left. He said, "Sit down, Linda. Thanks for coming. I think we can work something out together." He sat down again, as she slid into the chair opposite him.

The manuscript of the play was in front of him, penciled marks all over the page that was visible. When she sat down, though, the first thing her eyes fell on was a legal-sized sheet labeled "Contract." Her eyes found Dan's name on the first page, and Barr's. She frowned down at it. She said, "May I look at this first? After all, I'm Dan's agent, in a way. I'd like to see what terms—"

Barr frowned a little. "Sure. And, say, have him come in and sign it, will you? He hasn't done so yet, and I don't like to have things hanging fire like that."

Linda felt bothered. What was Dan thinking of, not to get Barr sewed up legally? With Barr in his present state of mind about herself, anything might happen. She said, "If you'll let me use your phone, I'll call him now."

"Sure." Barr pushed the phone toward her.

Dan answered the ring immediately. She'd thought that she would find him at his apartment. She said, "Look, Dan, how about coming over to Barr's office, and signing the contract for your play? I can't understand your not having done so before."

There was a silence. Then Dan said in an odd tone, "Linda, I—well, I guess I might as well tell you what's come up."

She felt suddenly cold inside, with a strange premonition of trouble. She said sharply, "What do you mean?"

SHE heard Dan clear his throat awkwardly. "Linda, you know this is a tough game. It's every man for himself. So I've had my play with an agent named McCready for some time. A couple of days ago, he told me that he had a man interested in producing the play as a musical comedy. I told him to go ahead. As a matter of fact, I already have an advance from McCready. I've told him I'll pull the play out of production with Dawson. McCready's man is giving me a lot better deal."

Linda couldn't believe her ears. She gasped, "Why, you can't do that. Barr has arranged for a theater, he's paid the actors their advance—and given you an advance, too!"

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Dan interrupted impatiently, "I'll return him the money he paid me, I intend to do that. As for the other money he's put out, he can afford it. I have to look out for myself, Linda."

Linda was appalled. Dan was acting in a completely dishonest manner. She cried, "Listen, Dan, I spoke for you to Barr. I'm in this, too. And I won't be a party to a crooked deal!"

Dan's voice hardened. "Don't be so damned upright. This is a tough game, and you know it. Cut out the Elsie Dinsmore stuff. I'm hitting for a big success. You don't make money being sentimental."

Linda didn't know what to say. Finally she spoke between her teeth, "I'm coming over there and talk to you, Dan. This isn't a thing to discuss over the phone. Wait for me there." She slammed up the the phone without a good-by.

Then she met Barr's questioning eyes. She didn't want to explain things to him, but how could she avoid it? His face hardened as she told him what Dan had done. But all he said, coldly, was, "Oh? I might have known something was up, the way he kept stalling about the contract."

She couldn't blame Barr for being disgusted; he was perfectly justified. Linda felt terrible. She'd arranged all this, and now Dan had played Barr a very dirty trick. Somehow, she had to straighten things out. She said, "Come over with me to see Dan, Barr. I'll see that you produce the play, and that he returns the other advance. He just can't do a thing like this. I don't know what he's thinking of."

Barr laughed shortly. "He's thinking of Dan O'Hara. Don't you know by this time that the guy is completely self-centered, Linda? I knew that the minute I looked at him."

Linda pressed her lips together, and wouldn't answer. Finally she said, "Come on. We'll get this straightened out now."

They drove to Dan's apartment in Barr's green convertible. Dan answered the ring at his door immediately. As Linda and Barr entered the apartment, Jenny Lester arose from a chair to face them. She cried. "Linda, you can't argue Dan out of this—it's his big chance. I'll let you know right now that I'm completely on his side!" She faced Linda and Barr defiantly.

Dan looked stubborn and defiant, too. He said crisply, "Dawson, I'm sorry about this. But I have to look out for myself. You know that."

Barr's mouth twisted ironically. "Sure," he said without expression. But the cynical look in his eyes told Linda he was despising Dan.

Linda felt she had to make Dan see that this was dishonest, and completely unfair to Barr. She began angrily. "Dan, please—you've got to return the other advance. Barr gave you his first, and—"

Dan snapped defensively, "I've got a check here made out to Dawson for his advance. That clears me." Then he looked long-suffering. "Of course, if he wants to get tough, and make trouble for me, I'll return the other cash he's spent, too. But I don't think I'm really liable for his production expenses, do you?"

Linda didn't know what to say. She stared at Dan with new eyes. Had he always been this sort of person? She hadn't realized it. She'd thought him sweet and boyish and gentle. Now he was showing a hard, self-seeking streak she hadn't known he possessed. It was very disillusioning.

Barr spoke shortly. "You don't even need to return the advance, O'Hara. I'll just put this down to experience." His low laugh was harsh, cynical.

Dan looked eager. "Well, if you feel that way about it, I can use every cent I have, Dawson."

Now Linda felt completely upset. Dan

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was being so horribly selfish. She started to speak, but Jenny cut in, "Let him alone, Linda!"

A smile warmed Dan's eyes. He went over and put his arm around Jenny. "You're always on my side, aren't you, little one?"

A STRANGE feeling of coldness went through Linda. Dan and Jenny were like two people who belonged together, barricading themselves against the outside world. She said, "You don't have to treat me like an enemy!"

Jenny tossed her head. "Well, you're acting like one. You and your precious Barr Dawson! For my money, there's more between you than meets the eye. I heard enough of your conversation when we went to his office that first day to know that—"

Barr cut in, with a sort of cold violence, "Shut up, Jenny!"

Dan flared instantly. "Who the devil do you think you're talking to? Let her alone!"

The two couples faced each other. Linda realized that she and Barr had instinctively lined themselves up against Jenny and Dan. Yet it was Dan she was engaged to—

She said slowly, "Dan, unless you play fair with Barr, you and I are through."

Dan's face hardened, and his eyes grew cold and resentful. Then he shrugged one shoulder. "If that's the way you feel about it—okay."

Dan was choosing his crooked way to success above her. Linda felt cold, empty. With shaking fingers, she removed her ring, put it in Dan's calmly outstretched hand. Then she turned toward the door. "Come on, Barr."

Outside in the hall, Linda's red mouth began to shake. Something inside her was going to pieces—her faith in Dan. She said, low, "Was he always like that? He seemed so swell, so fine."

Very quietly, Barr put his arm around her. He said, "Don't take it so hard. O'Hara's not worth it. Don't cry, Linda."

Linda stared up at him. Her own eyes were wide and wondering. Barr—the cynic, the opportunist. But, in the long run, he was proving to be fine and honest.

Sudden memory raced through her. She said, "Did you mean it, Barr?"

He frowned in a puzzled way. "Mean what?"

She swallowed. "That the Rosalies and Cecelias and Margots don't interest you any more?"

His eyes lit up. Suddenly he brought her around facing him, his lean hands gripping her shoulders in a half-desperate way. He said between his teeth, "Look, don't give me any invitations unless you want to follow through!"

Now things were straightening out inside of her, the kaleidograph had snapped into place and a new picture had formed. Or was it an old picture, one that had been waiting a whole year?

She said, her voice low and choked, "Oh, Barr, I—" Her voice died, and abruptly her blue eyes were drowned with soft, warm tears of reaction, of happy surrender.

He drew her close. He said, his own eyes devouring her face, "This is your last chance to pull out. If I kiss you, I won't take no for an answer. It's you and me from now on. Agreed?"

Yes, now she knew the truth in her own heart. The picture was clear. The engagement to Dan had been recoil; there'd never been anybody but Barr. Not really.

The tears stopped flowing, and she smiled up at him unsteadily. "Agreed, darling. Oh, darling, dar—"

His kiss, swift and hard, stopped the words on her lips. And she was content that it should be so.

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Dress Design

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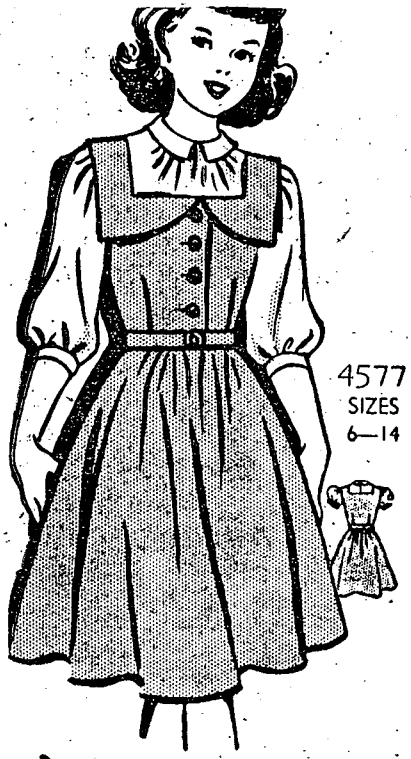
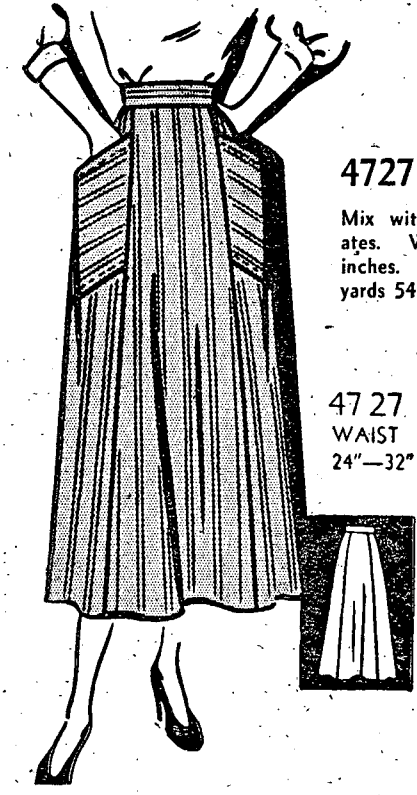


4577 Fashion-right outfit with flared skirt. Girls' sizes 6-14. Size 10 jumper, 2 yards 39-inch; blouse, 1½ yards of 35-inch fabric.

9462 Slenderizing shirtfrock with deep collarline. Sizes 34-48. Size 36 takes 4¼ yards; ½ yard contrast 39-inch fabric.



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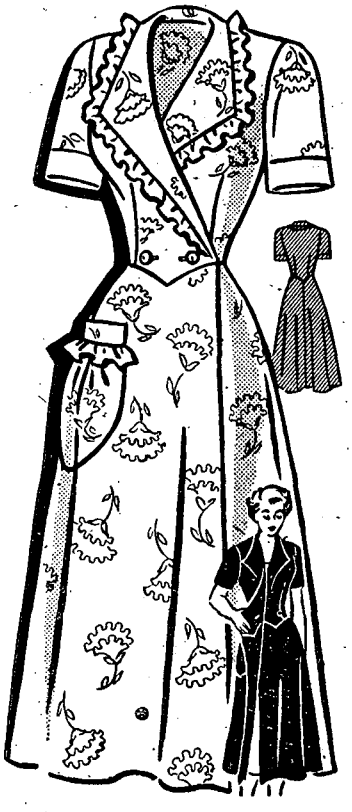

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Pattern Department DECEMBER, 1950
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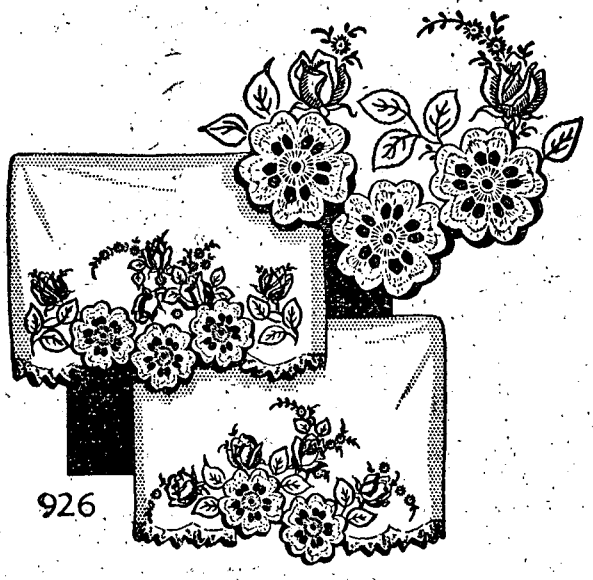

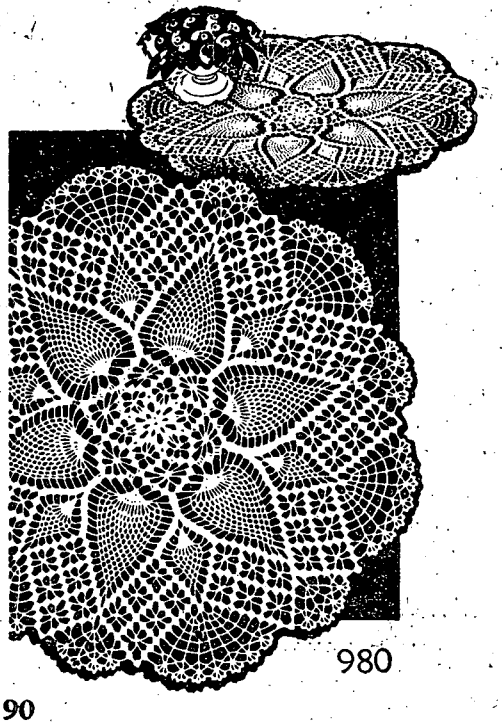

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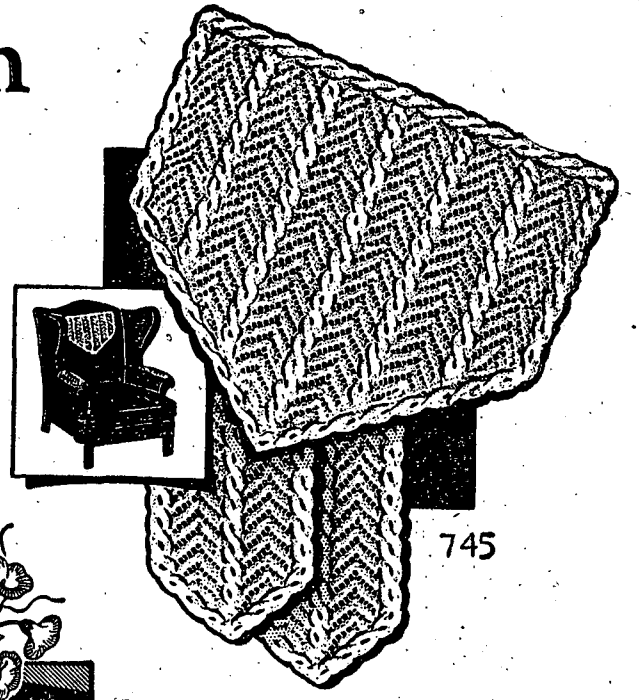

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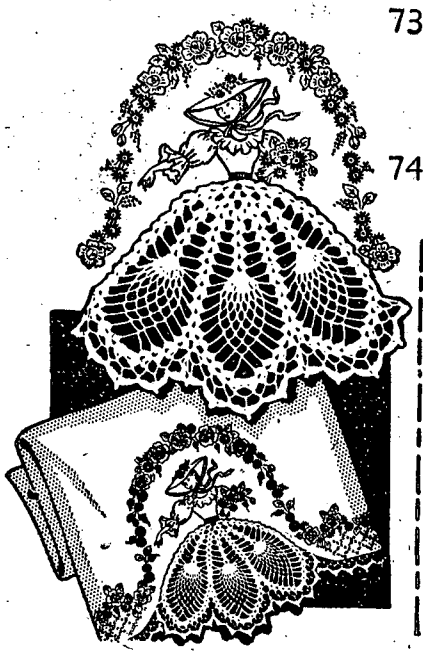

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Without Benefit of Mistletoe

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"Terry!" she gasped. "Is that a baby crying?"

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By PEGGY GADDIS

Terry discovered that his fiancee's heart was not in the right place—for him.

SHE ALREADY had been in love with him for more than a year the night that Terry Grahame stopped at her door and said gayly:

"Let's go out and ring bells and dance in the street, Gail, my child. The most marvelous, the most beautiful, the most charming, the most tantalizing girl in the world said tonight that she would marry me—when I become a star reporter."

Gail set her teeth above the little gasp of pain at Terry's words. He was so idiotically happy that he found no lack in her congratulations and she listened

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to him through an age-long evening as he told her of Doris Collier, whose father owned *The Clarion* on which Gail and Terry worked. Doris had been last season's most beautiful debutante.

Privately, Gail felt that Doris was spoiled, selfish, conceited, arrogant. Then she stopped herself and tried hard to smile and to admit that maybe she was a little bit prejudiced against Doris.

Dressing another night to have another dinner with Terry—so, she knew grimly, he could rave to her about Doris, who was away on a visit—Gail stared hard at herself in the glass. She was a girl of medium height, gracefully built, with burnished brown-gold hair and brown-gold eyes, a nice complexion and the usual assortment of nice eyes and teeth and hands.

"And what's it getting you? The chance to eat your heart out because Terry Grahame prefers a tall blonde with ice-blue eyes," she accused herself and turned swiftly away from the mirror, to don her new golden-brown sheer wool dress and the coat with the tiny mink collar.

TERRY was on her doorstep as she adjusted her smart little hat and went down to meet him. It was a glorious early November night. Not cold, just crisp and bracing, so they decided to walk to Pasquale's. Halfway to their destination, there came a very faint sound from a darkened doorway. Though faint, it was an unmistakable signal of distress. Terry, whose ears were always open to such sounds, paused and investigated. He emerged from the darkened doorway with surely the most dejected kitten anyone ever saw. It was no more than a month old, infested with fleas, half-starved and scared out of its small wits.

"An unmistakable case of abandonment," Terry said grimly. "Somebody was too kind-hearted to *kill* a cat so they threw it out here to starve to death."

The kitten mewed piteously and Terry said, "Starved, of course, along with his other worries."

He turned swiftly to Gail.

"Look, it's not far to my place. Mind if we drive there and give him a bowl of milk and a place near the radiator?"

Gail smiled with tender amusement as they hailed a taxi and got into it.

"I wonder, Terry, how many times we've done this? What on earth do you do with all the stray pups and sick kittens that you are forever rescuing in the streets?" she demanded, but her tone was warm and tender. She loved him for traits like these as much as for the other things that he did and said and was.

"I've got an aunt and uncle down in the country. They take them in, feed them up and then farm them out to good homes," he answered and grinned cheerfully at her.

They reached his apartment. Terry immediately began the task of restoring the kitten to something approaching normalcy while Gail looked on, her heart in her eyes. Why shouldn't she love this man, she asked herself passionately, as she saw him pour thick yellow cream into a blue bowl and put it down for the starved, amazed kitten. She watched him stroke it until the poor mite purred.

Gail went into the living room and sat down. The place was familiar to her. She and Terry had had many a home dinner here, cooked by herself. They had sat close to this open fireplace on cold blustery nights and she had dreamed ecstatic dreams that some day the place might be her home as well as his. And then Doris had come into the picture.

Terry went into the bathroom, carrying the kitten and Gail went out into the kitchenette and looked into the icebox. She nodded, fastened a towel about herself in place of an apron and went to work. A little later she heard Terry establishing the freshly washed kitten on

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a cushion before the open fire, where it purred like a boiling tea-kettle.

"He was such a dirty little mutt. I knew he had to have a bath if he was to get a good night's rest," Terry called apologetically. And then, on a note of keen interest he asked, "Say, what are you doing? Gosh, that smells good!"

He stood in the doorway of the kitchen as she drew a pan of fluffy, golden-brown biscuits from the oven.

"Set the table. Dinner is ready," she said briskly. "I think you said something about taking me to dinner, didn't you?"

Terry said, swiftly contrite, "Gosh, Gail, I'm sorry."

"Oh course you are, you blessed idiot," she said, and there was a note of tender laughter in her voice. "But don't worry. We're going to have a good dinner. And I'll tell you a secret. I like this much better than Pasquale's."

TERRY'S face cleared as if by magic. He went busily and capably to work spreading the gate-leg table with a fresh cloth, setting it with a gay, colorful peasant china that Gail had helped him to select. When they were seated, the omelette piping hot, the biscuits done to a turn, the salad crisp and enticing, he looked at her and said, with a deep sigh:

"Man, oh man, what a wife you're going to make for some lucky man!"

"Oh, no, I'm not. I'm going to be a nice old maid, and make life miserable for the girls in the circulation department, like Miss Mabel does now!" Gail protested, laughing above the ache in her heart.

"You an old maid? Why, you'll be married before you're a year older," Terry scoffed, as he split a biscuit and buttered it generously. "You're a born wife, Gail, my girl."

"Just as you are a born defender and rescuer of stray animals I suppose," she said. On a determinedly light note she added, "Eat that omelette while it's hot and stop talking about my future. It'll be here soon enough."

After dinner they washed the dishes and put the place to rights. The kitten slept with an abandon that proved he had had little chance to sleep soundly since he first discovered how big and cold the world is.

The evening was sweet. Perilously sweet. At last Gail got to her feet and said huskily that she must go. Terry brought her coat and as he held it for her, he looked down at her, smiling.

"Anybody ever tell you what a wonderful girl you are, Gail?" he asked her, tenderly.

"No. Suppose *you* tell me," she suggested lightly and turned, looking up at him.

Terry's eyes were on hers. There was the tiniest moment of breathless waiting and then impulsively he bent his head, obviously for a kiss. But she drew back, her hands on his arms, her face lifted and white, her eyes very big.

"No, Terry, don't. Not unless you—mean it."

He said, frowning, "Unless I mean it?"

Her eyes filled with tears against which she was powerless. She could only say, unsteadily, speaking the things that were in her heart, things she had sworn that he must never know.

"Yes, Terry, I mean just that. Unless you love me, don't kiss me. And you don't love me, of course, I know that. You love Doris and that's all right, too. I want you to be happy. Always and always. You see, Terry, I—love you, too. But promise me you won't let it spoil things between us."

He was grave, stricken with compunction; not uncomfortable or ill at ease. Terry was too big, too simple and honest for such petty emotions. He said gravely, tenderly, "My dear, I'm terribly sorry."

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She looked up at him, smiling brightly despite the tears that filled her eyes.

"Are you, Terry dear? Then don't be. Because I'm glad, terribly glad. I'd rather have loved you and not had you than to have loved someone less splendid and fine than you. Don't worry about it, Terry, *please*, and go on being friends with me. Please, Terry?"

He said huskily, "Gail, hush! I'm honored beyond anything I could possibly deserve. You'll always be my dearest friend, the one whose friendship means most to me."

HIS VOICE caught and he raised her hand, palm upward, to his lips. Gail bent her head and for a moment her lips rested against the crisp darkness of his hair. He never knew about the kiss for when he raised his head she was smiling at him with a bright, unsteady smile that was more poignant than tears.

"And now, please, I'd like to go home alone," she said shakily. "And promise me that we'll never speak of this moment again. It's not important."

Before he could move to stop her she had fled from the room and he heard her footsteps on the stairs.

Walking home through the crisp, chill darkness, Gail lifted her round young chin defiantly and sunk her clenched hands more deeply into the pockets of her coat.

"I don't care if I did spill over and tell him the truth," she told her outraged pride sternly. "I do love him. I didn't let him kiss me, so I wasn't trying to cheat on Doris."

But by the time she reached the sanctuary of her own room, her tears were flowing fast and she cried herself to sleep.

Doris returned from her visit a few days later and Gail knew that Terry was dancing attendance on her. She saw him hurrying from the building in the early evenings, and knew that he was meeting Doris. He came in late in the mornings, heavy-eyed from lack of sleep. She knew from the office gossip that he was drawing heavy advances on his salary and was deeply in debt to the paper. Once or twice when she and Jimmy Brewster were at the theater she had caught a glimpse of Doris, superb in ermine or mink, her golden head held high, her blue eyes frosty, beside a tall, handsome Terry in evening clothes, his good-looking head bent devotedly above the arrogant gold one.

Gail saw little of Terry at the office. Coming into the building in the morning, he paused to smile a greeting to her but there was never time for more than a word or two. More often than not he touched his forehead and winced, and eloquent signal that he had the traditional morning-after headache.

Gail would have been less than human had she not worried about Terry. She did worry about him a lot and lay awake nights wondering where he was and if Doris was being kind to him. Only, of course, she reminded herself that was silly. Doris was in love with Terry, why wouldn't she be kind to him? Only it was a little hard to imagine the spoiled, self-satisfied, completely selfish Doris being kind to any one. Kindness was scarcely her aim in life.

November sped along and Gail had Thanksgiving dinner with Jimmy Brewster and his family in their neat suburban home and once more refused to marry him. Refusing had become almost a habit, Jimmy complained.

"It's a habit," he insisted, with a valiant grin that did not quite conceal the hurt and hunger in his eyes. "I propose to you regularly on All Fools' Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas. Maybe if I'd vary the routine a little, you might like me, eh?"

"You're a lamb, Jimmy, and I like you

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enormously, but I'm afraid I'm not the marrying sort," Gail said.

"You're the marrying sort, all right, only you're just not marrying *my* sort," Jimmy said, and they left it at that.

A WEEK before Christmas, Gail was alone in her room. It was a cold, blustery night. There was snow in the air. Now and then sleet rattled against the windows and there was a bitter wind blowing. A good night, Gail had decided, trying hard to pretend that she wasn't lonely and heartsick, to stay home and wash stockings and blouses.

A little after seven, her telephone rang sharply and she picked up the receiver. It was Terry and the moment he spoke her name, she knew that something was wrong.

"Hello, Gail? How's for lending a hand to a pal in distress?" he asked, trying so hard to be casual that terror plucked at Gail's heart-strings.

"Terry, what's wrong?" she asked swiftly.

"Nothing's wrong, Gail. I think everything's perfectly swell. Only I need help in a great big way. How's for dashing over and standing by, for a spell?"

"Just as soon as I can get there, Terry," she said.

"Thanks, pal. You *are* a pal," he said huskily and hung up.

"A pal," Gail said to herself as she got out of the gay little printed negligee and into a warm dress and coat. "That's me all over. Just a pal."

But there was a warm, sweet little tingle in the thought that Terry, in trouble, had turned to her and not to Doris.

On such a night, of course, there was not a taxi to be found, so she walked, reaching Terry's place cold and aching and breathless. Terry opened the door to her and there was a light of joyous relief in his face.

"Gosh, I was never so glad to see anyone in my life! Come in, come in. You look like all the marines and a couple of battleships to a beleaguered American tourist caught in a foreign revolution."

"Heavens, as bad as all that?" she asked, laughing a little.

A sound stopped her in her tracks and made her stare at Terry in wide-eyed amazement and incredulity.

"*Terry* !" she gasped. "Is that a baby crying?"

"What does it sound like?" he demanded and ran his fingers through his tousled hair, his dark eyes a little desperate. "It's nothing else but, and I don't know what makes him cry. He's warm and dry and he's tucked safely in bed. Of course it has occurred to me that he *might* be hungry. Babies usually are, I'm told, but I don't know what to do about it. So I yelled for help."

HE LED the way to his bedroom. There, tucked into the very middle of the bed, looking very tiny and red and furious with anger, lay a baby, perhaps six months old. His tiny fists were flailing the air. His tiny feet were trying desperately to kick the cover, though Terry had tucked it in too well for that. His microscopic face was screwed into an expression of fury and helplessness that was almost comic. He was screaming lustily.

Gail flung off her coat and gloves, rubbed her hands, and lifted the baby out of his nest of blankets. Over the small downy head she stared at Terry, the baby in her arms and his fury seemed to abate a little.

"Terry Grahame, whose baby is this?" she demanded sternly. Terry leaned in the doorway and grinned at her, though his eyes were shadowed.

"Mine," he told her calmly.

"Yours? Stop talking like a fool and tell me the truth," Gail cried, outraged.

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"He *is* mine. The judge said I could have him if nobody claimed him and I could prove that I could take care of him," he answered with a little grimace that passed for humor. "Somebody went off and left him bundled up in a rubbish can in the Park—on a day like this. Can you beat it?"

Gail looked down at the little wizened face and her heart contracted with a sharp stab of pity.

"The poor mite," she whispered unsteadily.

"The police brought him in while I was interviewing one of our better-known criminals in the local jail. The judge was going to send him over to the Home, and it's just a week until Christmas. Gosh, Gail, a fellow's got a right to his first Christmas some place where he's an individual. Don't you think so?" he demanded with heat.

Gail grinned at him but there were tears in her eyes.

"I think so," she agreed firmly. "But I also think that a fellow's got a right to his supper, too."

"What do you think he'd like? It had me stumped. That was why I yelled for you," Terry admitted frankly.

"Personally, I'd suggest warm milk in a bottle. We can get one at the drug-store."

"I've got one. I stopped and bought a lot of things the drug clerk thought I'd need," Terry answered eagerly.

GAIL LOOKED down at the mussed, cheap clothing the baby wore.

"He's going to have a warm bath, some fresh clothes. Or *is* he? What about the fresh clothes idea, Terry? Had you given that a thought?"

"I bought him some things. Sure, a bath and then a warm bottle. That ought to put any guy on his feet. I'll get the milk," Terry said and went swiftly out to the kitchen.

Gail stared after him for a moment, amazed, but the baby whimpered and squirmed and she carried him into the bathroom. Terry came in while she was bathing the baby and stood for a moment looking down at her, as she washed the small, thin body.

"And you're going to be an old maid," he scoffed.

Gail looked up at him swiftly. Terry's eyes were on the baby.

"Looks like he might have missed a meal or two here and there, doesn't he?" he suggested. "We'll soon fix that up, old timer."

Gail lifted the baby, dried him gently and got him into a soft flannelette nightie. Outside, in the living-room, cradling a contented, comfortable baby who was eagerly absorbing his supper, she looked up at Terry. He was watching the baby with shining eyes.

"And now what, Terry?"

He looked swiftly at her.

"I mean, what happens to him next?" she said quietly. "What are you going to do with him, now you've got him? Pass him on to some one else or speed up your marriage to Doris?"

Terry's face was grim. He said quietly, "I'm going to keep him. It seems that he has permanently disconnected any marriage plans I may have had with Miss Collier."

"Terry! What are you talking about?"

"It seems that Doris isn't fond of children. Years from now when she's tired of playing and having a good time, she might not object to one child—adopted, by preference. But not for a good many years. The only sane and sensible thing she can suggest for me to do with Hizzoner there is to tuck him into the Home and forget about him."

Terry's voice was grim, his mouth thin-lipped and bitter, his eyes cold and bleak.

"She said all that?" Gail asked.

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"She was most explicit and most detailed, and she said it in tones that could not be mistaken."

"And you're going to let *her* go and keep *him*?" Gail demanded.

Terry looked at her sharply.

"Did you think there was any doubt about it?" he asked sharply.

She caught her breath and set her teeth for a moment. And then she said quietly:

"If you can give her up so easily, Terry, then you don't really love her. You never have."

HE MADE a little sound that was half an oath and got to his feet, moving away from her as though he could not endure that she should look upon his face in that moment.

"You think I don't? Well, maybe I don't, but what I feel hurts like hell," he said with simple fervor.

"Then, Terry, if you love her so much, be sensible. Send him away," she said, in a small, far-away voice. She was pleading against her own heart that cried out in sharp protest against the thing she was saying.

Terry came and stood beside her, looked down at the sleeping baby.

Involuntarily, her arms tightened about him. His helplessness, the warm small weight of him against her tugged at her heart.

"Send him away, huh? That's what your voice is saying, Gail, but your eyes are saying exactly what I'm saying—that Hizzoner stays! He's *my* baby. The judge gave him to me and I'm keeping him until he grows up and can shift for himself," Terry said grimly and bent above her to touch one tiny closed fist. "Always the thumb on the *outside* of the fist, old timer. That shows you can't be licked," he said, and tucked a tiny thumb on the outside of the fist. The little hand closed about Terry's finger and Gail caught her breath at the light in his eyes.

"Just a natural born family man, that's me," he said and sounded quite content that this should be so.

Gail was silent for a moment. And then she said quietly, "But, after all, Terry, you love Doris."

"We won't talk about Doris, if you don't mind, Gail, my girl," he said a trifle grimly. "Look, would you be an angel-child and stay here tonight with Hizzoner? I have a vague idea he may wake up hungry in the night and I wouldn't know what the heck to do about it. I'll dash out to a hotel, and then tomorrow maybe you'll help me find a nursemaid for him. Maybe I'll have to get a bigger apartment or something."

"I'll stay, Terry, of course," she said swiftly. "But wait until I put the baby to bed and we'll have something to eat. Have you had your dinner?"

"I DON'T remember. No, I guess I didn't. I was so anxious to get Hizzoner home out of the cold, I forgot. But don't bother, Gail. I can grab a bite on the way to the hotel." Terry was eager not to cause her more trouble.

Gail rose, carefully cradling the sleeping baby in her arms, and put him gently to bed.

"I haven't had my dinner either," she told him untruthfully. "And it's a miserable night to be out. You're going to sleep on the couch tonight and I'll look after the baby."

"No. I've got to think of your reputation, Gail, since you seem to have no idea of doing same," he protested trying hard to grin and to be his old accustomed self. "I'll stop at all the apartments on the way down and rouse up the neighborhood, so they'll know beyond any doubt that I went out."

"Terry, you fool," she said and went into the kitchen where she concocted a dinner of sorts out of such things as she could find.

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After they had eaten and cleared the dishes away, Terry went in to look at the sleeping baby and to pack a few things for the night. On his way out he met Gail's smile.

His fingers touched her hair for a fleeting moment and he said gravely, "I sling words for a living, Gail. I can describe, round by round, as nice a little prize-fight as you ever lost your shirt on, and murders and hurricanes and the like are my dish. But somehow, I can't seem to find words to tell you what I think of you for rallying around tonight. It's pretty swell."

"Skip it," she ordered with slightly unsteady severity. "I'm a pushover for abandoned babies and homeless cats and unwanted pups. I'm having the time of my life standing guard over Hizzoner, and don't you worry one scrap about him."

"As if I could," he replied simply, "knowing you are on deck. Well, see you in the morning. You're a good guy, Gail."

She stood very still when the door closed behind him, tucking away into the very depths of her heart that look in his eyes, the tone in his voice. They would be bright flames at which to warm her hungry heart in all the lean, chill years of loneliness that were ahead. For of course Doris Collier wouldn't let Terry go so easily. Even if she did, Terry wasn't in love with Gail and never would be. She was a fool to even think about such things.

THE apartment was filled with the pleasant aroma of coffee and crisping bacon the next morning when Terry let himself in, his arms filled with packages.

"How is he?" he demanded, like any proud young father whose fatherhood was so new it set strangely upon him.

"Sleeping like a lamb. He's a darling baby, Terry," Gail said happily.

"Of course. One of the finest. His name is Timothy, by the way. I thought that up all my myself on the way over. You'll be his godmother when he's christened, won't you Gail?" he asked happily as he began to disgorge oranges and tiny jars of baby-food and a wild conglomeration of infant needs that some clever salesman had convinced him the small Timothy must have.

He and Gail had a gay breakfast and when she had to leave for work, Terry held her for a moment. He said gravely, but with a tone in his voice that made the words more than a wealth of gratitude and praise:

"Thanks a million, Gail. You're pretty swell. I'm taking the day off to interview nurse-maids. Stop in at lunch-time and put the seal of approval on the best one out of a possible three that I can select this morning?"

"Of course, Terry," she answered simply.

At noon Gail stopped in and agreed with Terry that a stout, motherly middle-aged woman, whose references were excellent, seemed the proper nurse for the baby and then she and Terry returned to work together.

Late that afternoon half and hour before Gail would be free for the day, Doris Collier came storming into the place with a look of battle in her blue eyes.

"Are you Gail Russell?" she demanded of Gail.

"Yes, Miss Collier," Gail said quietly, though her heart was thumping.

"Oh, then you know who I am?" Doris asked, a satisfied gleam of egotism in her frosty blue eyes.

"Naturally. I've worked here for more than a year," Gail said evenly.

"Then you know that I am engaged to Mr. Grahame. I've stopped to tell you that I don't at all approve of your spending the night at his apartment on the flimsy pretext of looking after that infant he picked up somewhere." It was a cold, emphatic statement.

"I'm sorry you feel that way about it, Miss Collier, but after all, some one *had* to look after the baby," Gail said, angry.

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"It's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard of," Doris replied. "I've had my hands full keeping Terry from rescuing horrible dogs and half-dead cats. But *this*! This is positively the last straw! I simply will not stand it."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, but honestly, Miss Collier, he's a sweet baby, and Terry's crazy about him," Gail's tone was pleading.

Doris sniffed. "Terry's crazy about all sorts of unpleasant and uninteresting creatures," she snapped. "But I'll handle this. Just you stay away from his apartment and stay out of my affairs—and you'll keep your job a lot longer. Do I make myself clear?"

"Quite," Gail said icily.

"Good!" Doris smiled and drew her magnificent fur cape about her a little more closely. "I dislike very much to interfere in the affairs of the paper, especially to have people I don't like discharged. Good-by, Miss Russell," she said sweetly and went briskly to the elevator, leaving Gail trembling and helplessly furious.

LATER, as she was leaving, she saw Doris and Terry step out of the elevator and the look on Terry's face struck hard against Gail's heart. Doris was talking to him, firmly, sweetly, and Terry was listening, drawn against his will. As they went out into the cold night, Gail's heart sank a little. Did that mean that Doris was going to win? That small Timmy was going to be sent away? That Terry was going to be deprived of the happiness of keeping the baby and watching him grow up?

It was a crazy idea of Terry's, wanting to keep the baby, but Gail could understand it. In his place she would have wanted to do the same thing. The baby was so helpless, so appealing. Gail dashed a hand across her eyes and told herself she was being a fool, as she went out into the cold, swirling darkness and turned her steps home.

She did not see Terry until the second morning after Doris's visit. Then he paused at her desk on his way upstairs and studied Gail oddly.

"Timmy wanted me to be sure to stop and ask what he had done to annoy you." he delivered his message precisely. "He took a great fancy to you and you haven't been back to see him."

"Terry, you haven't sent him away?" Gail demanded eagerly.

Terry stared at her, frowning.

"Sent him away? Where would I send him?" he asked mildly.

"The Home. Some place," she said unsteadily.

"He's got a home as long as I can keep the rent paid and shoes on his feet. Did Doris stop to talk to you the other day?" he demanded unexpectedly. Instantly he saw that she had, because his question had taken Gail a little off guard and her expression answered him. "So she did. I might have known. And *that* was why you've neglected Timmy and me?"

"Silly! I haven't neglected either of you! But she—I thought—"

"She made a scene and said she was going to make me get rid of Timmy. Well, Timmy and I talked things over."

Thrusting a thumb and forefinger into his vest pocket he brought out a shining bauble that was a diamond ring much more expensive than he could afford.

"Oh, *Terry*!" Gail said stricken.

He nodded, thrust the ring back in his pocket, and said briskly, "It's only three days until Christmas. High time we started seeing to Timmy's Christmas, don't you think? He wants a tree, of course, and his sock hung up—only I've promised him one of mine. It'll hold more. How's about helping a fellow out? The stores are open tonight until nine, you know."

"Terry, I'd love it," she said happily.

"Swell. So would I. I'll call by for you

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at five and we'll plunge into the merry maelstrom. Better wear shinguards and a pair of brass knuckles. I hear the crowds are pretty tough this year," Terry said casually as he strode off toward the elevator.

Gail felt that a little of her heart went with him. A little of her heart would always be twined about Terry Grahame. But she knew that even though Doris had broken their engagement, it did not mean that Gail could catch him on the rebound. She didn't want him like that. She only wanted him if he loved her as she loved him. And that, of course, wasn't possible. Not while he held warm within the recesses of his heart, a vision of a girl as beautiful and alluring as Doris Collier.

GAIL drew a deep breath. No, there was little or no chance that Terry would ever love her. But he had broken with Doris and there was no longer any reason why Gail should have to discipline her rebellious heart by refusing to see Terry. She could help him look after Timmy. She could help him make Timmy's first Christmas something to remember. And when, as must happen sooner or later, Doris and Terry took up again where they had left off, Gail would have a lot of beautiful memories on which to feed her hungry heart in the lonely years to come.

So that night Gail and Terry shopped for Timmy's first Christmas. A tree first of all. A tree was very important, Terry had firmly stated. It had to be just so big and no bigger. It had to be fresh and green and crisp. And when they had finally selected it, there was an hour or more devoted to very careful selection of the baubles with which to trim the tree. They had to be bright and shining, yet not too bright nor too shining for baby eyes to stare at. There were ropes of tinsel and there were small presents to be tied on the tree. And when at last Terry and Gail, their arms laden with awkward, bulky packages, collected the tree and a taxi and were driven home, Gail's heart was singing.

For a little while people had thought she was Terry's wife and that had been a warm delight in her heart. For a little while she had dreamed that it was true and that it was for their own baby son she so carefully selected the small white kid shoes, soft as silk, the little silver rattle with its tiny tinkling bells, the warm little mittens that were to be her own contribution to small Timmy's first Christmas.

The nurse opened the door to them, her finger to her lip.

"He's asleep, Mr. Grahame. He's a little feverish and croupy tonight. Nothing serious, of course. But I'd like him not to be awakened, if you don't mind," she said in a whisper.

"Right you are, nurse. We won't make a sound," Terry promised.

In the living room, while the nurse made fresh coffee for them, Terry sighed and stretched luxuriously. His eyes were shining and Gail, with a little stab at her heart, knew that he was wrapped in thoughts of Timmy to the complete exclusion of any other human being.

"This is what Christmas is really for, Gail," he told her softly. "A man's own home and hearth, his own kids, a Christmas tree. Gosh, when I think of the Christmases that I've used up just for a lot of fancy drinking and wild parties! I had to wait until I was twenty-six to find out what Christmas really means."

He looked at Gail and asked, newly curious, "What have you done with your Christmases, Gail?"

She shrugged.

"Until I was eighteen, I spent them with an aunt who didn't believe in foolishness for children at Christmas. And these last two years I've spent them with Jimmy Brewster and his family."

"You like this Brewster guy, don't

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you?" he said. "Remind me to give him a punch in the jaw."

She said quietly, "Why, Terry?"

"Why? What a silly question! Because he's making a play for you, of course. Why else? Come to think about it, I'm jealous of the guy," he said staring at her oddly. "Yes, sir, now that I think about it, I'm jealous of the guy!"

GAIL got to her feet and reached for her coat.

"Don't be silly, Terry," she said coldly, because she could not bear it that Terry should be mocking and teasing about such a thing. If he had been really jealous—but he wasn't. He was only amusing himself. Having fun.

Terry took her coat, dropped it on a chair and with his two hands on her shoulders, he turned her about so that the light fell sharply upon her face. Gail met his eyes gravely. She knew what he would see there but she was powerless to turn her face away.

He studied her gravely with a growing intentness and she heard him say, half above his breath.

"Yes, sir, I'm certainly jealous of that guy."

His hands drew her closer to him. His arms went about her. Gail caught her breath on a little sobbing note and said shakily:

"No, Terry, not—"

"I know. Not unless I mean it. Well, believe it or not, Gail, my darling, I *do* mean it. Don't look at me like that. I'm as surprised as you are, but it's true." His voice was low-pitched and not too steady.

Her heart was racing madly. Terry's arms were close about her. He bent his head a little more and bridged the scant few inches that lay between them as his lips sought, found, claimed hers. She felt a little shock of delight in response to that kiss. A kiss that seemed to reach down into the very depths of their beings. A kiss that was the sweetest, the most gloriously lovely thing that had ever happened to either of them.

They drew a little apart and stared almost shyly at each other. Gail was flushed, bright-eyed, trembling. Terry was startled, his eyes wide, a little amazed. The moment was too poignant to be borne in silence and Terry, striving hard for a lighter note, waved his hand in a little gesture that took in the room as he said, laughter threading his voice:

"And all entirely without benefit of mistletoe!"

Gail caught her breath. A little of the rapture, the glory of the moment drained away. He was mocking. He had not meant that kiss. He had kissed her lightly, in spite of her plea. Suddenly, it was not to be endured. Swiftly she caught her coat in one hand, her hat in the other and ran out of the room. The door banged shut behind her. Terry, calling her name, took swift steps after her but as he reached the door Timmy's nurse spoke from the bedroom door, her voice urgent, anxious.

"Mr. Grahame, I think you'd best call a doctor. I don't like the way the baby's breathing."

Terry hesitated. He was torn between the need to follow Gail, to make her understand that he had not meant that kiss lightly, that he had discovered he loved her, that she belonged here with him and Timmy. He was torn between the need to stop her and make her understand, and the need to look after small Timmy.

"I'm afraid he's pretty sick, Mr. Grahame," the nurse insisted and Terry turned, grim-lipped, to the telephone.

GAIL spent an all but sleepless night trying to pull herself together, trying to still the mad tumult at the memory of Terry's arms hard and close about her; his mouth warm and demanding on hers. She had confessed, humbly and honestly, that she loved him. She had begged him

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not to kiss her unless he loved her, too, and she was sure last night's kiss had been an impulse that had meant nothing.

Her mention of Jimmy Brewster had aroused the conquering male in Terry. Although he didn't love her himself, he had resented any other man's loving her. So he had kissed her, and it had meant nothing, because he still loved Doris Collier.

Doris could not have hurt him so bitterly if he had not loved her. Gail remembered the way he had looked when he showed her the ring Doris sent back to him.

He would make up with Doris. Eventually, they would reach a compromise. Gail believed that some day Doris would win and small Timmy would be sent away and Doris and Terry would be married. The thought of that was a knife in her heart, but Gail was too clear headed, too essentially honest even with herself not to admit that that was inevitable.

She watched the lobby the next morning for Terry but did not see him.

She made her way home through the crowded streets, her heart heavy in her breast. The shops were open. Tired clerks were trying desperately to appear interested in the wants of harassed, last minute shoppers. There were great stacks of holly wreaths, heaps of delicate green and pearly mistletoe. On corners and in front of shops, the familiar red-flannel, white-whiskered Santa Claus stood with his clanging bell collecting nickels, dimes, and quarters.

Christmas was everywhere except in her own heart. She went home to her lonely room and went to bed, to cry herself to sleep, hating herself for the weakness yet unable to do anything about it.

Late the afternoon before Christmas, Terry came into the office, his face white and tired, heavy circles beneath his eyes. He paused as Gail, anxious and concerned, hurried to speak to him.

"It's young Timothy," he said heavily and would not meet her eyes, as though he doubted his composure if he did. "It begins to look almost as though he was going to be cheated out of his first Christmas in his own home, after all."

"Oh, Terry, *no*!" Gail cried in heartfelt shock and pity.

"Pneumonia. Exposure. He's had a little cold all along. We'll know definitely in a few hours, the doctor said," Terry told her briefly, almost harshly. "I can't go home alone. Come with me, Gail."

Gail said, her voice catching in her throat:

— "I'll get my things, Terry."

THERE was a taxi nearby and in a few minutes they were climbing the stairs to Terry's apartment. Terry put out his hand to turn the door-knob but it fell away as though he dared not push open that door and learn what might lie on the other side of it. Gail, sick with pity and tenderness, opened the door and Terry followed her dumbly into the room.

The nurse, her eyes red with weeping, stood up as they came into the room and at Gail's look she shook her head and said quickly, "No change. The doctor says the crisis will be here soon. We won't know anything until afterward."

The bedroom door opened and a white-clad trained nurse stood there.

Terry said humbly, "May I see him, nurse?"

"Yes, of course, Mr. Grahame."

Timmy's face was waxen and thin. His tiny fists were doubled feebly, one on his little chest, the other flung up, palm outward, against the pillow. Gail's heart contracted, so little life did there seem to be about the baby.

The trained nurse spoke to Gail in a whisper.

"If it were his own child, I don't think he could take it any harder. The poor mite has so little resistance. It's not as though he had been a healthy baby to be-

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gin with. He was under-nourished and the exposure weakened his whole constitution. I'm afraid there's not much chance."

Gail choked back the little gasp of protest and rebellion. She went to Terry and with her hand on his arm coaxed him out into the living room and into a chair while the trained nurse went back into the bedroom and closed the door.

Terry looked up at Gail and suddenly he drove one clenched fist into the palm of his other hand and got to his feet as though it was impossible to stay still any longer.

"He's had such a rotten break all along. That's what gets me, Gail," he said harshly and she knew that it helped him to put into words some of the sharp, bitter rebellion in his heart. "He never had a square meal until he came here. He was probably always cold and frightened and unwanted. And now when he's found a good home and somebody to love him, he has to check out. Gail, I—I can't take it! He's such a game little cuss. If you could have seen him fight, trying so hard to breathe—"

His voice broke and he turned away, looking with unseeing eyes out into the street.

Gail, speech beyond her, looked about the room. A tiny sock hung from the corner of the mantel. Beside it, one of Terry's socks that he had "promised to lend him because it will hold more." The beautiful little tree stood on a table in the corner, the decorations heaped carelessly about it, waiting to make it a thing of beauty. Awkward, knobby looking bundles that she and Terry had bought as the baby's presents. Christmas for a dying baby.

Suddenly, loud in the tense stillness came the sound of the door bell and Terry turned swiftly.

"Maybe that's the doctor."

"I'll open it," Gail said and ran across the room. But as the door opened, she stepped back with a little involuntary protest, for it was not the doctor who stood outside, but Doris Collier. She was a dream of loveliness in a white velvet dinner gown, orchids on the collar of the supurb ermine wrap, a silvery scarf about her golden hair.

"HELLO, darling," she greeted Terry, her voice sweet and smooth as honey. "It's Christmas Eve and I've decided you and I have been behaving like foolish children long enough. So I've come to be very humble and tell you that it is quite all right and you may keep your absurd, ridiculous infant so long as you promise not to love him more than you do me. I daresay it will all work out beautifully. Even if it doesn't, we'll have a lot of fun for a while, anyway."

Terry was studying her with a queer, intent look. Doris did not like it.

"Well, after *all*, Terry, I've apologized and humbled myself into the dust. Haven't you anything to say to me?" she demanded petulantly, her voice not quite so honey-sweet nor so velvet-soft.

"There was no occasion for you to humble yourself, as you put it," he said stiffly.

Doris glided toward him, her arms reaching out to him, her lovely face lifted to his.

"Kiss me, darling," she murmured sweetly, her voice warm, seductive. Gail flushed a little to hear it, feeling herself helplessly, but inescapably an eavesdropper. "I'm crazy about you, Terry darling. You knew you only had to stay away from me to make me realize that, didn't you, you brute?"

She set her red mouth on his and Gail turned sharply away. She heard Doris say, puzzled, resentful.

"Why, Terry, what's the matter? You're not *still* angry with me, after I've apologized? You can't tell me you haven't worried. You've positively *aged*, darling. Did you miss me so much?"

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Her voice dropped to a cooing note and Terry said, putting her away from him with stern, not too gentle hands:

"My haggard condition is due to the fact that Timmy is desperately ill."

"Timmy?" Doris repeated, puzzled and then, "Oh, is that that ridiculous infant's name?"

"It is, and he's not a ridiculous infant. He's a very fine baby and he's having a very hard time managing to go on living," Terry said grimly.

"Oh, what a pity!" Doris said brightly, mechanically sympathetic, though both Gail and Terry knew from her tone that she was relieved at what struck her as a very nice little solution to the problem of disposing of the baby. "But, after *all*, Terry—"

"I think you'd better go, Doris, if you don't mind. I'm in no mood for bright conversation," Terry said grimly as he walked to the door.

Doris drew herself to her full height. The glance she flung at Gail was venomous. As she wrapped the ermine coat about her she said haughtily:

"I'm beginning to understand, Terry—and Miss Russell. But really you can hardly expect me to overlook finding her constantly about, spending more time here than in her own place. Or has she *got* a place of her own, now that she practically lives here?"

"That'll be about enough, Doris. This is the way out," Terry said curtly, and Doris, her blue eyes snapping with rage, her lips drawn tight, walked past him and out of the door.

"And that's that," he said grimly. "Sorry for what she said about you, Gail."

"Skip it," she said, equally terse.

THERE was a little silence and then Gail said quietly:

"You know, of course, that she'll never forgive you for this, Terry."

"Who wants her to? I don't understand how I could ever have believed I was in love with her in the first place."

"She's lovely, Terry."

"Outwardly, yes, but she's got a small, mean, petty mind. She's selfish, arrogant, spoiled. Funny, those things didn't make much difference until she began to howl so about Timmy."

The arrival of the doctor interrupted him, and everything was forgotten but the baby's labored breathing.

The doctor's face was non-committal but he urged them out of the room. In the living room Gail brought Terry a cup of hot coffee and sat beside him, coaxing him to drink it.

"I suppose you think I'm a sentimental sap, Gail, to behave like this."

"Drink your coffee and stop behaving like an idiot. You know what I think of you," she ordered with tender sternness.

Terry was smiling a little though it was a smile that did not reach his eyes.

"Swell little Gail!" he said huskily.

Outside, the snowy streets were thronged with people on their way to midnight services in all the churches. The solemn, beautiful tolling of the great bells rang through the midnight silence and Gail and Terry, huddled close, listened. The sound of voices came after a little. A murmur of words they could not distinguish. Gail felt that she could not bear it if small Timmy were to go out of a life that promised him so much.

The doctor came to the bedroom door and said quietly:

"He has passed the crisis. He has a splendid chance."

Terry and Gail stared at each other, wide-eyed. The doctor went back into the bedroom. The easing of their suspense, the tension that had gripped them had come so quietly, with so little melodrama that for the moment they were dazed by the reaction.

Gail said unsteadily, her voice shaken with tenderness, "Terry, darling, don't

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you understand? Timmy's going to *live*!"

And then, with her arms about him, Terry's head went down on her shoulder and probably for the first time in his life, Terry knew tears. Tears that healed and soothed and rested his strained, anxious heart. And after a moment when he looked up and into Gail's shining eyes and lovely face he said:

"Gail, it's too much for one man to have. *You* and small Timmy. Because I *have* got you, haven't I, my dearest?"

"OF COURSE," she said softly. "If you want me. I've been yours for the asking since that first morning you stopped at my desk and introduced yourself."

His arms held her close, and his mouth found hers. Then he said huskily, "Why did you run away that other time when I kissed you?"

"Because you laughed and said 'And all entirely without benefit of mistletoe!' and I'd told you once before I couldn't bear for you to kiss me lightly."

Terry's arms held her so tightly that she could scarcely breathe and Terry's mouth was warm and demanding upon her own. And after a long, long time he said gently:

"Gail, darling, I've been such a blind fool. If it hadn't been for Timmy, I might never have been able to distinguish between the real thing and a swell-looking make-believe. Darling, darling, will you let me prove that it's you that I love, and that it's never been love for any one else? Not really love?"

Because her happiness made her a little shy, she said, flushed and shining-eyed, "It's Christmas morning, Terry, and Timmy's tree isn't even trimmed."

He held her very close and hard against him, and then he said radiantly:

"Christmas! And *what* a Christmas! With everything on earth that I want right here within these four walls."

The bells spoke again from the church.

"Merry Christmas, darling," Terry's voice was shaken with the awe and the wonder and the beauty of their love that stood forth so bright and shining.

"Merry Christmas, Terry. Oh, my dear, my dear," Gail said breathlessly, and clung to him with both small shaken hands as he bent his head and once more set his lips upon her warm, sweet mouth.

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By ALMA PORTEGAL

For most of us Christmas means roast turkey, and all the trimmings that go with the goodness of that bird. Or perhaps, if our origin stems from the Teutonic, the bird might be a goose; but it is in the cookie, cake and sweet bread range that our distant forebearers really show their individuality.

DANISH BUTTER BALL CAKE

1¼ cups butter
2 egg yolks
¼ cup lukewarm water
4½ cups sifted flour
½ teaspoon mace
½ teaspoon cinnamon
¾ cup sugar
1 package yeast
½ cup lukewarm milk
1 teaspoon salt
½ cup chopped nuts
1 tablespoon sugar

Cream ¾ cup of the butter with the ¾ cup sugar until light and fluffy. Add the egg yolks and beat well. Dissolve the yeast in the water; let stand for about 5 minutes then add the milk to the yeast mixture. Sift together the flour, salt and mace and add this alternately with the yeast to the egg mixture. Mix very well and turn onto a floured board. Knead dough until smooth, about 10 minutes or so. Break off small amounts of dough and shape into balls the size of a large grape. Melt the remaining ½ cup of butter in bottom of a long shallow baking dish about 13 x 9 x 1½ inches; sprinkle with the nuts. Place balls in pan, making two layers. Between the first and the second layer sprinkle the cinnamon and the 1 tablespoon of sugar mixed together. When all the balls are made let this rise until double in bulk. (Cover with a clean towel while rising). Bake in a hot oven 425 degrees for ½ an hour or a little longer.

BOHEMIAN COOKIES

1 cup shortening
1¼ cups confectioners' sugar
dash of salt
1 cup ground nuts
1¼ cups sifted flour
6 oz. milk chocolate, grated
1 teaspoon vanilla
dash of cinnamon

Cream the shortening and the sugar together. Add the remaining ingredients and mix well. Drop by teaspoons on ungreased cooky sheet and bake for 40 minutes in a 250 degree oven.

GERMAN ALMOND SLICES

¾ cup sliced almonds
½ cup sugar
¾ cup sifted flour
½ teaspoon lemon extract or juice of half a lemon
2 additional tablespoons sugar for top of cake
½ teaspoon baking powder
2 eggs
2 tablespoons ice water

Sift the flour and the baking powder together. Cream the eggs and the sugar thoroughly, add the extract and the water. Beat well. Add the sliced nuts and flour and mix again. Pour into a greased pan,

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sprinkle the sugar over the batter and bake in a 375 degree oven until brown.

SWISS CHRISTMAS BREAD

1 package of yeast
¼ cup lukewarm water
¼ cup sugar
1 teaspoon salt
¼ cup chopped citron
½ cup chopped almonds
½ teaspoon grated lemon rind
¾ cup scalded, lukewarm milk
¼ cup melted shortening
1 beaten egg
3¾ cups flour
1 cup chopped raisins
¼ cup chopped green and red cherries

Dissolve the yeast in the water and let stand for 5 minutes. Add the milk, shortening, sugar, egg, salt and flour. Knead well and let rise under cover of a towel until double in bulk. Cut or punch dough down, knead lightly again and let rise for another half hour. Roll out on lightly floured board and sprinkle with the citron, raisins, almonds, candied cherries and lemon rind. Work the dough so that the fruit is thoroughly distributed. Form into a loaf and place in a well-buttered bread pan. Let rise until it again doubles in bulk. Brush top with a little melted shortening and bake for 45 minutes in a 375 degree oven. When cold cover with this frosting:

Sift 1 cup confectioners' sugar into a bowl. Moisten with 2 tablespoonsful of milk. Flavor with ¼ teaspoon almond extract.

ICELAND CHRISTMAS CAKE

1 package yeast
¼ cup lukewarm water
½ cup shortening
½ teaspoon lemon extract
1 cup sugar
cup lukewarm milk
1 cup flour
1 well beaten egg
½ teaspoon vanilla
1 cup mixed raisins and chopped citron

also 1 cup of flour (additional) sifted together with 1 teaspoon salt, 1 teaspoon baking powder, and ½ teaspoon nutmeg.

Dissolve the yeast in the water, add the milk, and the flour, and beat well. Let rise in a warm place under a towel until light, about 1 hour. Add the shortening, egg, extracts, sugar and the mixed flour combination. Beat well; then add the raisins and citron. Turn into 2 small loaf pans which have been greased and lightly floured and bake at 375 degrees for 30 minutes.

MEXICAN HOLIDAY COOKIES

1 cup butter or shortening
2 cups flour
1 teaspoon vanilla
¼ cup confectioners' sugar
¼ teaspoon salt
½ cup finely chopped pecans

Cream the butter and the sugar very thoroughly. Add the flour sifted with the salt and then add the vanilla. Work in the nuts. The dough will be very stiff. Break off small pieces and shape into balls by rolling between the palms of your hands. Place these small balls on a greased cooky sheet and bake in a 350 degree oven for about 12 minutes.

NORWEGIAN HOLIDAY COOKIES

2 eggs
4 tablespoons melted butter
2½ cups sifted flour
½ cup sugar
1 tablespoon cream
dash of nutmeg

Beat the eggs and the sugar together. Add the butter, cream and nutmeg. Add the flour, mix well, then chill dough thoroughly. Place on floured board and roll to the thickness of pie crust. Cut into diamond shape pieces about two inches across. Make slits lengthwise in the center, pulling one corner through the opening. Drop into deep hot fat and fry until lightly browned. Drain on paper and serve sprinkled with powdered sugar. These are served with a glass of wine.

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Ban was a man more easily kissed than caught

Ex-Ladies Man

By

BLAKE REED

"THE TROUBLE with you, Ginette," her cousin accused, "is that your technique with men is all wrong. That's why on all our double dates you wind up a wallflower and I have two men on my hands."

She sighed, as if her cousin were a cross that was becoming too hard to bear. "I've tried my best to introduce you to interesting men. I can't help it if you don't click with them. You've watched the way I handle them long enough so that you should have learned something, but you go right on being profound and serious, boring them with intellectual discussions when all they want is an evening's entertainment and a bit of smootching when they say good night."

"A girl can get pretty shop-worn around the edges, Tenny," Ginette reminded her, "and you can't convince me that all men are mental lightweights, just out for a bit of fun and some smootching. If that were true there'd be darn few marriages."

"Marriage!" Tenny scoffed. "Who wants the drudgery of living on a budget, looking at the same man every night? I have a good job, I'm free. I don't intend to get serious until I find a man who can give me all the luxuries that I could easily get accustomed to."

Ginette smiled faintly and asked, "Where do you hope to meet this walking bank?"

"Oh I'll take a winter vacation in Florida," Tenny replied airily. "I've got everything it takes to land and hold any man when I'm ready to settle down."

"I wish I had your self-assurance," Ginette sighed with grudging admiration.

"No reason why you can't have it," Tenny advised. "Of course you'd have to do a complete re-organization job on yourself. You're pretty enough, but a little too plain, and your intelligence sticks out like a sore thumb. There's nothing that scares a man off quicker than an obviously brainy girl. History proves that all the important men in the world have married the gals who played dumb and poured on the glamour."

"I can't imagine your acting dumb with any man. You never have," her cousin complained.

"I will when the right one comes along," Tenny assured her. "I'll hang on his every word. I'll be big-eyed and as worshipful as if I'd been waiting all my life for him."

As she laughed and shrugged her shoulders, then started to leave the room, Ginette thought gloomily, She'll get what she wants out of life because she has nerve and ego—plus glamour, something I couldn't attain no matter how I tried to make myself over.

JUST then the phone rang on the table beside her. As she reached for it and called "Hello," Tenny came back into the room again, saying excitedly, "I'll take it." But Ginette didn't hand it over to her for a very humorous voice on the other

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"It's fate, angel," he said. "You just can't get away from me."

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end drawled, "Hello, Cleopatra. How is my charming, green-eyed siren this evening?"

A sudden, reckless impulse seized Ginette, inspired by something in the voice. She laughed and bantered, "This is not Cleo. I'm Circe."

"Circe?" the voice echoed. "You mean that gorgeous historical blonde who turned men into those little four-legged creatures?"

"The same," Ginette laughed back, "except I'm not a blonde. I'm more on the titian type, with blue eyes."

"You sound interesting, but I must have the wrong number. That is, not the number I thought I had."

"Oh, you have the right number," she teased, "but the wrong girl. I think you want my cousin, Tenny Lake. Wait and I'll put her on."

"No, you wait," the voice commanded. "I want to get a peek at you. How about a date?"

"Maybe," she hedged. "Talk to Tenny and maybe she can arrange it."

"Okay," the voice promised. "I'll see to it that she does."

Ginette handed the phone to Tenny, who by this time was practically livid with anger, but she forced herself to be very gracious to the voice. Ginette sat and watched her while she tried to talk in riddles so the other girl wouldn't get the drift of the conversation.

She didn't even call the voice by name. She said, "Why yes, darling. It sounds like fun, and I'm sure my cousin will be thrilled to meet you."

As she finally cradled the phone, she turned on Ginette like a tornado. "If this is your idea of getting even because I gave you that lecture about men, you're barking up the wrong tree. Why, this man is third-rail. He'd tie you in knots in a moment and make you look ridiculous."

"That wouldn't be a new experience for me," Ginette replied blandly. "But of course if you're afraid to have me meet him—"

"Afraid?" Tenny cried derisively. "You're welcome to any man you could get away from me but you wouldn't even know how to start. Why, Ban Tavish would be bored with you in five minutes."

She bit her lip as the name slipped out.

Ginette exclaimed in surprise, "Not Ban Tavish—that fast talking television star, who has the program, 'Hello Sweetheart'?"

"The same," Tenny agreed dryly, "and if you've heard his program, you know what a line he throws at girls, giving them comedy advice on how to land a man. That's probably why he wants to meet you. He's always looking for new material to work on. When he tangles with a girl who tries to clown with him as you did on the phone, he cuts her to ribbons in no time."

"He sounds repulsive," Ginette persisted stubbornly. "I'm going to enjoy meeting him."

"Very well," Tenny retorted with exaggerated patience. "You'd better dress, we're meeting him in an hour, and after that Circe label you gave yourself, you'd better wear some make-up and one of my snappy dresses."

"Thanks, but I'll manage," Ginette replied cheerfully, but after fooling around with her hair for half an hour, letting it hang loose in an effort to look more glamorous, she decided to stick to her own personality. After all, this was just a dare date that a reckless urge had trapped her into and it would no doubt be the same as all the other dates she had with Tenny—a dud.

WHEN she was finally ready, her red-gold hair was in its usual neat bun in her neck. Her face had a clean, scrubbed look, her lips only faintly tinged with rouge. Her plain, smart suit was slate-blue, with darker blue accessories.

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When Tenny came to the door she looked at Ginette disapprovingly, but something in her eyes told Ginette that Tenny realized she was over-dressed beside her. Her suit was jade- green wool. She wore several jangling chain bracelets, huge earrings and too much make-up.

"All ready, Polly Prim?" she drawled.

Ginette nodded, and Tenny jibed, "Haven't you forgotten your make-up or are you trying to look anemic so Ban will feel sorry for you?"

Ginette smiled tolerantly and advised, "Don't worry about me, Ten. I never use much make-up and I'll probably be so excited meeting the great Tavish that I'll blush all over the place."

Tenny looked disgruntled and started fumbling with one of her earrings. "These darned things hurt," she complained. "Guess I'll take them off. Run along and get the elevator. I'll be right out."

Ginette smiled to herself. Even before Tenny joined her at the elevator she knew her make-up would be toned down, a couple of the bracelets, plus the earrings, missing. She pretended not to notice, but Tenny grumbled, "If you persist in looking like Camille, I don't feel right looking so disgustingly alive and healthy. I just hope you won't be sorry you forced this issue. Ban is like no one you've ever met before. He says just what he thinks and lets the chips fall where they may."

"That's okay with me," Ginette lied blandly. "Where are we going to meet him?"

"At the Tee Vee Club. It's a rendezvous for television celebrities."

He was standing talking to the hat-check girl as they walked into the club. Ginette had to look up, he was that tall. He had a rugged, weathered face, gray, analytical eyes, and a crooked grin that made her feel as if she'd just been awakened from a long sleep. She gave no sign that he affected her unusually. When Tenny said airily. "Hi, darling," and started to introduce Ginette, he stopped her, amusement tinging his voice.

"Don't tell me, let me guess. Not Circe, surely, but Alice in Wonderland. Right?" He directed the question at Ginette.

"Right," she agreed tartly. "And you're the Cowardly Lion."

"Ouch!" he exclaimed, putting his hand to his face as if she'd slapped him. Tenny glared at her disapprovingly but he insisted, with an infectious smile, "I had it coming, and I can see that this angel puss is going to keep me on my toes. Come on, let's get a table."

As they were being seated, Ginette had the feeling she had started something she couldn't finish. She knew she wasn't clever enough to top everything he said. She was relieved when Tenny started chattering to him. When the waiter came to take their order she babbled, "I'll take Scotch Mist." Then she looked at Ginette as if she were about ten years old and said, "I suppose you'll take the usual, Claret Lemonade."

Ginette's face reddened and Ban said quickly, "Say, that's a good suggestion. I haven't had a Claret Lemonade since my prep school days. Make it two, waiter."

Ginette melted and decided that he had a heart beneath the flip exterior. Tenny looked as if her chair had been pulled out from under her but she scoffed, "Oh, stop clowning, Ban. You know you're a Scotch man. You started me drinking it."

"I didn't have to twist your arm," he retorted good naturedly.

Just then, a man stopped at the table and said, "Hello, Ban. I thought I'd find you here. Mind if I barge in a moment? I want to talk to you about a deal that's just come up."

"Sit down," Ban invited, casually. He explained to the girls, "This is my boss, Jay Hathaway."

Ginette had seen his picture in the papers many times. He was rich and very

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important. He seemed very young to be such a big-shot. He was dark and intelligent-looking with an air of indifference that was intriguing.

Tenny gazed at him as if he were the answer to her prayers but to Ginette's surprise, although he seemed completely engrossed with what he was saying to Ban, she could feel that he was appraising her out of the corner of his eye.

THE MOMENT he excused himself and left the table, Ban turned to Ginette with a twinkle in his eye and asked, "Are you available tomorrow night?"

"Why?" she asked in amazement.

"Because Jay is going to ask me to fix up a foursome. I didn't miss that interested gleam in his eye."

"Can't he arrange his own dates?" she asked disdainfully.

He looked at her skeptically a moment then drawled, "Why yes, I imagine he can. If you'd prefer to go out with him alone I'll give him your phone number."

"Don't bother," she snapped furiously. "I'm not the least bit interested."

"I'm flattered," he teased.

"Why?" she cried exasperatedly, because his narrowed eyes were making her feel as if she was caught up in an emotional blizzard.

"You're not interested in a big-shot like Hathaway, but you came out to meet me," he advised with a satisfied grin.

She grinned right back, but mockingly, and retorted, "That was sheer curiosity. I've never met a celebrity."

His eyes held hers in a glance like a lasso until Tenny complained, "Has everyone forgotten I'm here?"

"Sorry," he apologized, "but this child has me spinning. If I don't watch my step, I'll be proposing." He stopped short with a look of mock dismay on his face then gasped, "What am I saying?"

Tenny laughed stridently. "Oh, Ban, you're priceless, but it isn't fair to rib Ginette. She might take you seriously."

"He's not ribbing me, and I'm not taking him seriously," Ginette cried. "As a matter of fact I'm getting a bit bored with the whole thing so if you'll excuse me—"

She got up and left the club hastily, realizing she wasn't handling the situation intelligently but she was sure if she stayed any longer she'd break down and weep. That was the last thing she wanted to do in front of Ban Tavish.

Outside, she stood bewildered for a moment, wondering which direction was toward home. She wanted to walk and get her confused thoughts oriented. She tried to tell herself she disliked Ban Tavish heartily. But it didn't work, for she kept wondering hopefully if he really had been attracted to her. How on earth had such an egotistical male managed to get his foot into the doorway of her heart?

SHE WAS walking along blindly when a man stepped up to her and said, "Hello. What happened?"

She looked up into Jay Hathaway's inquiring eyes.

"Oh," she replied breathlessly. "I just decided to go home. I have a headache."

He chuckled to himself, and then said, "I'll bet you're the first girl who ever walked out on Ban Tavish."

"Oh, I didn't walk out on him," she protested. "He was with my cousin."

She made a move to go on, but he persisted, "I'll drive you home if you'll wait a moment. My chauffeur is fixing a flat on my car."

When she hesitated he said candidly, "I was debating going back into the club again, just to see you. I'd already planned to ask Ban to arrange a party so I could get acquainted with you."

His admiring manner was balm to her troubled emotions, even though it an-

(Please turn to page 116)

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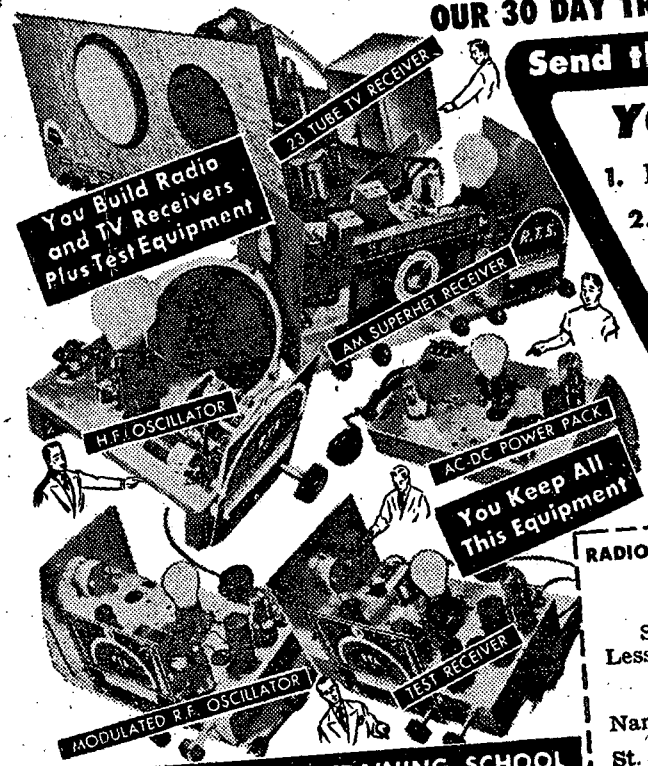

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(Continued from page 114)

noyed her that Ban had been right in predicting he would try to date her.

"Thanks," she replied sincerely, "and I'll appreciate a lift home."

As they walked to his car he suggested a ride through the park to cure her headache. She agreed, thinking that if she spent some time with him he'd talk about Ban Tavish, maybe say something in his favor that would make her feel less foolish having fallen so hard for him.

He didn't mention Ban's name but concentrated on telling her how much he admired her at first glance and, as well as being lovely to look at, she had the air of a girl who had something upstairs.

"Do men like intelligent girls?" she parried.

"I do," he replied, so abruptly that for a moment she felt rebuffed. But as they rode through the park she found conversation with him easy. He was charming and gracious, but he just didn't ring a bell with her. It made her impatient with herself for he was the kind of man she'd dreamed of meeting.

"Darn that Ban Tavish!" she fumed to herself.

When he finally left her at her door he said earnestly, "I can't begin to tell you how much I've enjoyed meeting you. I'm going to call you tomorrow. I hope you'll give me a date."

"All right," she said, feeling as if she'd have to push herself into a date with him.

It was still early, but she felt restless which was a new sensation. She'd always prided herself on being able to spend hours alone, contented. Now she felt as if the walls were closing in on her.

The phone ringing suddenly made her jump nervously. She answered it mechanically, then, as she recognized the voice, she had the feeling of an electric charge along her spine.

"Well, hello," Ban said, relief in his voice. "This is the third time I've called. I was beginning to get worried about you."

"Really?" she hedged, realizing it sounded very trite.

"Yes, really," he mimicked, "and let's not be juvenile about this. I made a dent with you and you did the same with me. Meet me tomorrow night at seven at the Tee Vee Club and we'll discuss it at length, my sweet. Pleasant dreams."

The click of disconnection made her furious. Then, for no good reason, she started to laugh—on the hysterical side, she had to admit. But a moment later satisfaction set in. He was interested in her, after all. The proper thing to do, of course, was ignore the date, make him plead for another. But would he?

At the moment she hadn't the slightest idea whether she'd be strong enough to ignore the date. She only knew she wanted to see him again.

WHEN she heard Tenny's key in the door she braced herself for a scene. To her relief the other girl's manner was quiet and subdued.

Her voice was sincere as she said, "I feel responsible since I introduced you to Ban. You haven't had the experience with men that I've had. You don't realize what lengths they'll go to in order to satisfy a bruised ego—especially Ban. I'll admit you piqued his interest tonight by walking out on him. No other girl has ever done that. I know he called you and made a date for tomorrow night, but if you keep that date you'll be sorry."

"If he's such a heel, why do you date him?" Ginette flared angrily.

"Just for laughs, and because he introduces me to interesting and important people. He knows I wouldn't believe a word about love from him so he doesn't try to romance me. With you it's different. He thinks you fell for him on sight."

(Please turn to page 118)

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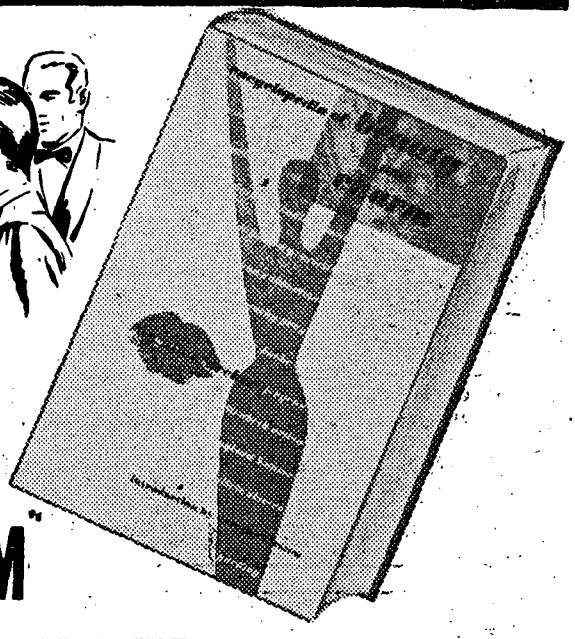

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ALL-STORY LOVE

(Continued from page 116)

"Did he say that?" Ginette demanded.

"Not in so many words," Tenny admitted, "but I know how he operates. I'll tell you something else: he thinks his boss will try to date you and he bet me a John Frederick's hat that you'd refuse a date with him. I told him that any girl would give her eye teeth for a chance to score with Jay Hathaway but he said very self-assuredly, 'Not Ginette, wait and see.' "

"You don't have to wait and see," Ginette said vehemently, "You've won a hat!" She told Tenny about her meeting with Jay and that he was going to call her tomorrow for a date. She concluded defiantly, "And when he calls me, I'll date him!"

"What about your date with Ban?" Tenny queried.

"He made it—I didn't. I won't be there," she insisted with an assurance that was definitely synthetic.

She spent a miserable, wakeful night, wondering why human nature was so perverse. She had every reason in the world to detest Ban Tavish, but in the few moments she'd been in his company she'd fallen so hard for him she knew it would be a long time before she could forget him. She got no satisfaction at all out of the prospect of standing him up.

When Jay Hathaway called her bright and early the next morning and asked her if she'd have dinner with him that night at eight at the Stork Club, she hesitated a moment; then remembering Ban's bet with Tenny she said hastily, "Why, yes, I'll be happy to join you."

When he offered to pick her up at the house she insisted, "I'll meet you at the club." Scarcely knowing why, she was scared to death she might weaken and go to the Tee Vee Club at seven, if only to tell Ban Tavish he'd lost his bet.

She was glad that Tenny had left for the office so she didn't have to discuss

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it with her. Ginette worked for an air lines executive who was in Europe and had given her the week off.

She spent the day shampooing her hair, doing her nails and going over her wardrobe to choose something special to wear. At noon, a messenger boy brought her two boxes of flowers. An old fashioned bouquet of forget-me-nots and sweetheart roses from Ban, with a card that said, "From your ardent admirer, Ban."

From Jay there were two golden, bronze orchids with just his card enclosed. She thought wryly, Yesterday, I couldn't even land a man. Today I have two. But her heart warned, "You can't count on Ban. He's only trying to win a bet."

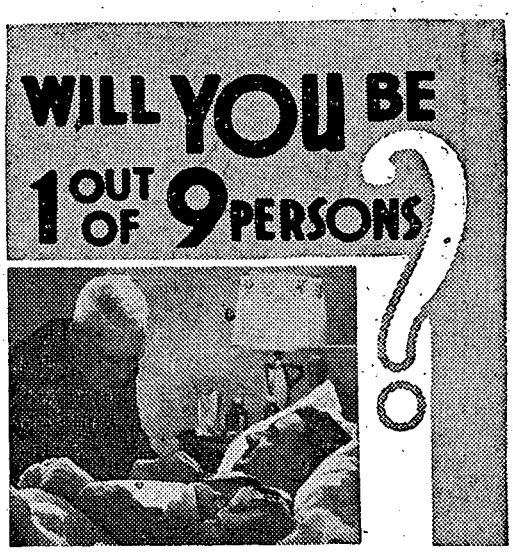
In that split second of realization she knew she didn't dare go near the Tee Vee club or she'd be the pigeon he thought she was.

SHE WAS dressed at six-thirty, in velveteen the color of wood violets, and wearing Jay's orchids. She left the house and took a bus ride so she wouldn't be home if Ban called.

She entered the Stork Club at eight o'clock on the dot, feeling as if a million butterflies were loose within her. Then she stopped short, her face aflame as Ban came toward her.

"Don't look so embarrassed," he admonished. "I put you on a spot and you retaliated very cleverly. I wouldn't have had it otherwise. Now, let's have dinner. You must be starved."

"But—" she began, completely confused. He took her arm and guided her to a table. His voice, as usual, tangled her emotions as he explained, "Jay had to fly to the coast unexpectedly. He tried to get you on the phone. When he couldn't he was distressed at the prospect of standing you up so he asked me to pinch hit for him. Needless to say, I was most willing."



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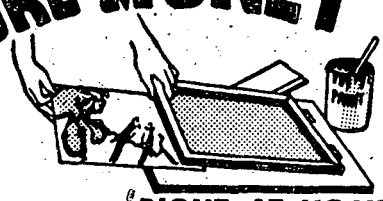

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ALL-STORY LOVE

They were seated now, facing each other. He said softly, "It's fate, angel puss. You just can't get away from me."

Under the levity in his voice there was a thread of huskiness that tore at her heart. She knew she dare not let it get the upper hand so she retorted mockingly, "Fate or no fate, you're not winning that bet with Tenny. I came here tonight to meet Jay Hathaway."

His slow smile of satisfaction startled her. She thought in dismay, Now what did I say that was wrong?

He didn't keep her in suspense. "It's worth fifty hats to learn that you dated him to make me lose that bet. I'll pay gladly and there'll be no more nonsense about you dating anyone else but me in future."

"I haven't the slightest intention of dating you," she flared.

She was completely unprepared for his reaction to that statement. He studied her gravely for a moment, and then said softly, "In that case we'll have to make this a very special date, so the memory will last for a long time."

It would have been so easy to believe him, but she remembered Tenny's warning that she'd had no experience with this type of man.

His slow, indulgent smile and lazy voice snapped her to attention. "Don't look so perturbed, angel puss. You're as safe with me as if you were in your mother's arms. I won't make any passes. In fact, as much as I'd like to spend the evening with you, if you're afraid, I'll take you home at once."

"What is there to be afraid of?" she challenged.

"Yourself. We clicked the moment we met, and you know it. But you're scared to death to trust your own judgement because Tenny has probably told you I have a fast line and I'm deaf to wedding bells."

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Her face reddened. She protested indignantly, "Who says I'm interested in wedding bells? That's why I don't believe you've really fallen so hard for me. You're type of man just doesn't do that at first glance."

"How do you know?" he demanded. "And just what is my type of man? I talk fast, and I clown—it's my business. I'll even admit that I have an address book bulging with phone numbers, but that's normal, too. It isn't quantity that counts, but quality. You know, my sweet, every man with a fast line and a sense of humor isn't a bachelor."

THE WAITER came just then. Ban asked her if she'd like a champagne cocktail. She nodded assent. When he asked her what she'd like to eat she replied, "Anything you order."

"Steak, French fries and a tossed salad," he told the waiter. When the waiter left Ban looked hard at the orchids pinned to her lapel and said teasingly, "If I knew you liked orchids I'd have baked a cake."

She had to laugh then and she said contritely, "I should have thanked you for your flowers. They were lovely."

"I thought so," he agreed. "They looked like you."

It was such a sincere compliment that it touched her deeply. The orchestra started to play a tune.

"Dance?" he asked.

She arose and went into his arms and it was just the way she knew it would be, like being wrapped up in a warm, enveloping blanket on a cold night. He danced perfectly, with no attempt to hold her too close. When a girl in a tight, black satin dress sang the second chorus of the song, he said, "That must be a new tune. I've never heard it before. Good lyrics too. *I'll tell the world I love you.*" His lips were close to her ear, and

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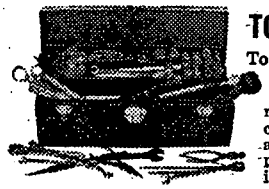

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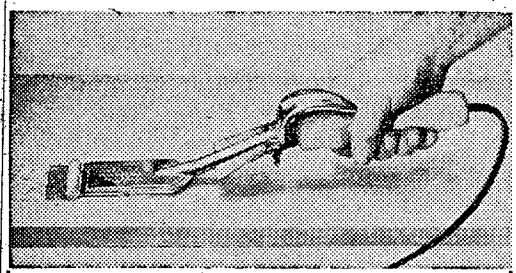

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he whispered, "That might be a good way to convince a girl, don't you think?"

She laughed and parried, "A bit dramatic—but convincing, I guess."

They finished the dance in silence. When they got back to the table they were occupied with the cocktail and the food. He asked questions about her work and her personal life, but he seemed preoccupied.

At eleven o'clock he looked at his watch and said, "Shall we go? I have an early rehearsal."

Her heart dropped with a dull thud. He was bored. Tenny was right. She didn't have what it took to hold a man.

As he drove her home he said casually, "If you haven't anything better to do tomorrow night, will you watch my program? I'm going to try out something new and I'd like to get your reaction."

"All right," she said coolly.

He didn't kiss her good night. He said almost too pleasantly, "It's been a wonderful evening. I hope we'll meet again."

"Do you?" she asked.

THE NEXT day dragged endlessly. Ginette was glad that Tenny had a date that evening. She wanted to be alone to watch Ban's show. As she tuned it in she was so jittery she could hardly sit still.

When he came on the screen his magnetism and charm seemed to reach out and engulf her. He said, "Ladies and gentlemen, you know that this program is beamed for laughs and fun. I give advice to lovelorn girls on how to land a man. Well, I have a confession to make. I'm like the shoemaker who was so busy fixing other people's shoes his own family went barefoot."

There was a big laugh. When it subsided he chided, making a mock frown of dismay, "Don't laugh—I have a problem. Instead of giving advice to contestants

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tonight I'm going to turn the tables and ask how to land a girl."

There was another big laugh, then as he interviewed the contestants they all gave him funny and ridiculous answers. No one took him seriously. The program was a bigger hit than it had ever been before.

Ginette was furious. She concluded that he'd seen a chance for a fresh comedy slant at her expense, and used it. Several times her hand reached out to switch off the program but somehow she couldn't.

Finally he said with mock severity, "You've been a big help. No wonder I can't get to first base. But if you'll bear with me I'd really like to get serious for a moment and conclude the program with a song, dedicated to a lovely angel puss. I hope she's listening."

Ginette's heart climbed into her throat as he started to sing, *I'll tell the world I love you.* At first the audience giggled as if they were expecting a comedy twist, but he had an excellent baritone voice and sang the song so convincingly that tears welled in her eyes.

When he finished the applause was deafening. Ginette sat still watching the clock, wondering if he'd call and knowing if he didn't she'd call him.

When the phone rang she rushed to answer it as if it was a reprieve, saying shakily, "Hello."

"Hello," he came back cheerily, then in a challenging tone he asked, "Was I convincing?"

"Oh, Ban, you idiot," she cried.

"Why, angel puss," he said in surprise. "That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me. Listen." There was a buzzing sound on the line then he explained, "That's one of the kisses I wanted to give you last night and if you'll wait I'll do much better later."

"I'll wait," she promised, "but please hurry."

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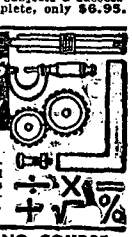

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ALL-STORY LOVE

(Continued from page 33)

weeping, hands lifted to the stars too far to reach.

Laura turned away. She dropped herself to the bed once more, listening to the night creakings of the house, the ticking of the luminous-faced clock, a personal ghost haunting the darkness toward the dawn when she would lose Mike.

She heard another sound. Unsure at first what it was, Laura lifted herself on her elbows: Quiet steps in the hall, a light tread on the stairs. She went to her door.

Holding it back a crack, she saw Mike going down. But he couldn't be leaving like this, running out to avoid a scene with her, writing a note or sending a letter from New York. Hesitantly, Laura crossed to the stairs.

THE MOONLIGHT came brightly through the living room windows, revealing the room. Mike sat on the arm of the couch, his head lowered, seemingly lost to his thoughts. He took a cigarette and struck a match. In the momentary flare, Laura saw the haggard, drawn worry of his face.

She went down, and entered the living room.

He swung around, facing her. Recovering from his surprise, Mike tried to grin. "I couldn't sleep. Thought there might be some coffee on the stove. Sorry if my prowling woke—" He broke it off and crushed out the cigarette. Mike's tone gave up the pretense. "Laura, I have to talk to you."

"Yes, I know." She looked past him to the fireplace, the glow of embers dying there from the bright warmth that had cheered the guests on Christmas Eve. "It hasn't worked out, has it, Mike?"

"Because you belong here and I don't?" He stepped closer. "You came home and met Paul again, and Christmas is a sentimental time. You were here without me,

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with everyone you love, with everything that has been part of you, your family and friends and the farm." Mike gripped her shoulders. "But you're wrong, Laura. We belong to each other, here or New York or wherever we are. Have two people ever fought harder for love?"

Her eyes lifted to Mike's, and she was almost afraid to believe what she had heard. Her mind and her heart must have imagined the words she wanted him to say, wishfully deafening her to the hurt she expected. But with a swift, uncomprehending joy, Laura felt the touch of his lips, the reality of Mike's arms around her.

"We've lived through every season of the year," he said. "Sun and storm and snow. Through troubles and accidents, anger and embarrassment, across the whole width of the country. Will you ever know Paul that well? Laura, remember what I told you? Not even in a million years could I love you any more than I do now."

Mike's hands relaxed. He took them away. "I can't keep you if you want him, Laura. When I saw how you felt about our marriage, I thought—maybe if you didn't know right away, I'd have a chance to fight for us, to make you realize it wasn't a crazy thing we had done . . ." He shook his head and took something from his pocket. "You'd better—read this."

Laura glanced at the telegram in his hand. The telegram Judge Foster had mentioned on the phone. Mike *knew* they weren't married. He had come to her not because he had to, not because he wasn't free to stay with Miriam. Mike was here because they belonged to each other and nothing could keep them apart.

Suddenly, she was crying again. But laughing, too, at the fool she had been to doubt his love. Clinging to Mike, kissing him, Laura told him then. "And after the

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judge phoned me here," she said, "I called your apartment. When Miriam answered, I thought you—"

"Oh, darling." Mike didn't let her finish. "Miriam was with a crowd from the paper that broke in on me for a surprise party to celebrate our wedding. One of the fellows saw the lights on in my apartment and he got the gang together, thinking we had both come home." He grinned. "Miriam knows how it is with me. She brought a guy from the advertising department with her. He makes a lot of dough."

"I wish her luck." Laura smiled.

"And Paul." Mike caught her close. "I wish everybody luck. Me, I don't need it." Lifting her in his arms, he swung her around, hugging her as Laura's feet kicked out from the floor.

Her heel struck the screen at the fireplace. It crashed over with a clatter that echoed through the house and set them to laughing again as they stepped back. There was a pattering around upstairs and the lights went on.

Blinking down at them from the top of the steps, her robe pulled around her, her mother said, "Laura!"

Dad had a grin as big as Mike's. "I didn't think it was mice. Come on now, Mother. They'll be up in a minute. You need your rest if we're going to plan for a wedding."

"What? Luke, what are you saying? Why, they—"

"I'll tell you all about it." Dad's grip was firm on her arm, leading her away. Glancing back, he winked broadly.

The upstairs light snapped off, and Laura gave her hand to Mike. She turned to him wordlessly and they kissed again. The Christmas tree shone with a soft radiance of promise in the moonglow that sifted through its evergreen to fall upon them. At the top, its lifted branches held a star.

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THE FRIENDLY CIRCLE

(Continued from page 8)

folders. Like sports, tennis especially, like ballgames, shows, picnics. I would like pen pal my age.

Ronnie

A-2690 HAS TRAVEL BUG

Here is a thirty-nine year old widow who works for a living and doesn't have much time to make friends. Am very fond of traveling and would like especially to hear from pals who have traveled. I also like music and reading.

Kit

A-2691 ENJOYS MUSIC

How about some of you girls writing to a fellow who is nineteen, about five feet ten, has dark hair and eyes. Am very active in all types of sports, especially baseball. Like almost all kinds of music. I promise to answer all letters I receive.

Bud

A-2692 LONELY TWIN

This thirty-seven year old woman, five feet four, has brown curly hair and gray eyes. Like sports, dancing, car-riding. Have a twin sister who recently married and left me. I do practical nursing in a private hospital. Would like to hear from friends near my own age.

Lonesome

A-2693 TEXAN

I wish some of you girls and boys would write to a lonesome Texas guy. I will answer all letters I get. I am six feet, have blond hair, blue eyes and am thirty-seven. So come on, someone, and write, don't let me down!

Slim

A-2694 MYSTERY FAN

Here is a twenty-three year old brunette with hazel eyes, who is five feet three. I'd like to hear from anyone around my age. I like sports, dancing, movies, records and am an ardent mystery fan. Won't someone please get in touch with me?

Frenchy

A-2695 DOESN'T DRINK

This twenty-three year old man, single, is not contemplating marriage for a good while. I do not drink, gamble, or smoke and would be interested in receiving any amount of letters and promise to answer all the sensible ones.

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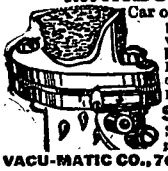

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ALL-STORY LOVE

A-2696 NURSE

I am a nurse, twenty-four years old, five feet eight, have dark brown hair and eyes. I enjoy letter writing and will exchange snapshots with all who are interested. Would anyone with a few spare moments kindly drop me a line? I promise to answer all letters.

Dimples

A-2697 LIKES SPORTS

I am twenty-nine years old, a boy, very lonesome and I have lots of time to write, even though am not too good at it. I am five feet four, have brown hair, blue eyes. I collect pictures and will exchange photos with any pals. My favorite pastimes are sports.

Mack

A-2698 HOSPITALIZED

Writing letters is a favorite pastime says this twenty year old girl confined to a hospital. I am five feet five, have blonde hair and green eyes. Collecting salt and pepper shakers is one of my hobbies. I love music of all kinds. Want male pals my age and older.

Lanny

A-2699 CARNIVAL TRAVELER

Here is a nineteen year old boy who likes to travel with the carnival. I have brown hair and blue eyes and am five feet four. I make a hobby of collecting pictures of pen pals. I also like the movies a lot.

Frank

A-2700 FROM PHILIPPINES

Here is a seventeen year old boy in high school in the Philippines. I have black eyes, brown hair. Like dances, horseback riding and writing letters to pals all over the world. My hobby is stamp collecting and asking pictures from friends.

Rudy

A-2701 SEVENTEEN

A high school girl of seventeen, five feet four with blonde hair and brown eyes, would like to hear from boys and girls all over and will exchange photos. I like to swim and dance. My hobby is collecting photographs. Will answer all letters. I love to write.

Rudy

A-2702 WEST AFRICAN BOY

This eighteen year old boy just finished college in Nigeria, West Africa. I

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am five feet five, have dark hair and eyes. Like to sing, dance. My favorite subjects were English, English literature, Geography and History. I would like very much to have American pals.

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A-2703 VERY LONESOME

I am a very lonesome person, and I love to write letters. I am a thirty-five year old woman with dark brown hair and blue eyes, five feet tall. I like sports of all kinds and like good music. I would like very much to hear from men around my age.

Eve

A-2704 CAN TANGO

Here is a thirty year old man, six feet tall, and wears glasses. Likes baseball, also football. Am a pretty good dancer, my favorite dance being the tango. Also like to travel and have done quite a bit when I was in military service. Like chess too.

Joe

A-2705 BLONDE

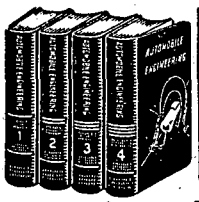
This lonely girl is blonde with blue eyes, and is five feet four. Writing is my hobby, and I like swimming, dancing and horseback riding. Come on, guys and gals, give an eighteen year old gal a job of writing. Promise to answer all.

Blondie

A-2706 AWAY FROM HOME

My age is twenty-three, am five feet eight, have dark curly hair and hazel eyes—am a male. Just finished college and am working far from home and friends. Have traveled a lot. I like dancing, music, sailing and sports. Would like to hear from some girls my age.

Bob



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Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ App. Psychology ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Bus. Correspondence ☐ Bus. Law
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship ☐ French
- ☐ Good English ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics ☐ Illustration
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Motor Traffic ☐ Postal Civil Service
- ☐ Retailing ☐ Retail Bus. Management
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Spanish ☐ Traffic Management

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemical Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
- ☐ Architecture ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Prac. FM and Television
- ☐ Prac. Telephony ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio, General ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician
- ☐ Power House Electric
- ☐ Ship Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
- ☐ Auto Technician ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineer's, Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Forging ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Pattermaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker ☐ Ship Drafting
- ☐ Ship Fitting ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking ☐ Welding Engineering
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Locomotive Machinist
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman
- ☐ Steam and Diesel Loco. Eng.

Stationary Engineering Courses
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combus. Engrg. ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Power Plant Engr. ☐ Steam Engineer

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing ☐ Loom Fixing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

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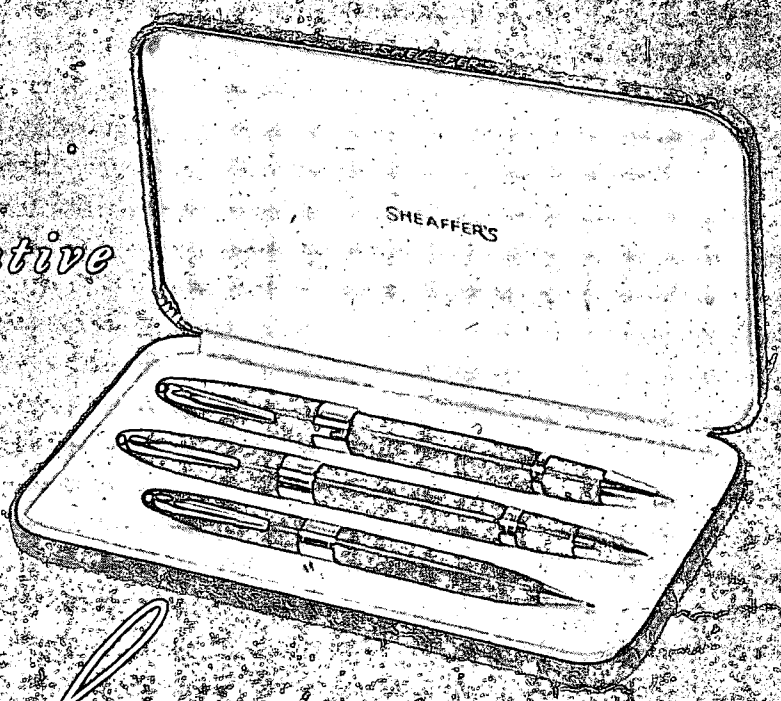

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